STUDENT SUPPORT IN A VIRTUAL SPACE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUCCESS

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Abstract

International students represent a large portion of student populations at some higher education institutions in the United States. In response to the complexity of the student immigration process, more international students are choosing to pursue their US degrees online, while fulfilling their personal and professional obligations in their home nations. Writing and communicating in English can be difficult for international students pursuing degrees in the US. Virtual writing centers are one source of support for international students that are available at most online higher education institutions to aid and guide international students as they pursue their degrees. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the experiences and perceptions of international, online student populations as they use their institution’s writing center services. A transcendental phenomenological method was used to explore the lived experiences of international, online students using online writing centers. Interviews were transcribed, and coded which served as the source of data in this study. Through the phenomenological analysis, five themes emerged: perceptions and insights of an online degree, skills and competencies gained through writing center use resources used in the writing center, perceptions of the writing center, and international recommendations to improve writing centers.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The growth of the adult student population and the continued expansion of online and distance education programming continues to impact the higher education sector. With the job market swarming with new professionals armed with bachelor, masters, and doctoral degrees, certain fields emphasize advanced degrees when competition for jobs increases. Adults, already working in the professional sector and recognizing the importance of additional credentialing, look to improve their qualifications, change careers or decide to gain an additional knowledge about a subject of interest to them (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004). Adults choosing to return for additional education may not always be able to attend traditional, face-to-face programs, due to family or other professional barriers (Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011). Due to demands of work and familial roles, many adult student populations select online higher education programming options.

Online higher education options are not only enticing for domestic students, but increasingly for international students seeking credentials outside of their home countries to improve their knowledge and skills for a global marketplace (Ho, Lin, & Yang, 2015; Wysokinska, 2009). The needs of adult student populations, to say nothing of the international adult student, differ from the needs of the more traditional-aged student populations. The quickly evolving higher education landscape and changes to student demographics creates a gap in data regarding how international, online, adult students access and use student support resources that are in place to improve student success outcomes. This study is intended to shed light on the use of the writing center by international, online, adult student populations with the goal of strengthening supportive services that can result in higher persistence and completion
rates. This study will use a transcendental phenomenological research approach to qualitatively explore the research problem.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research related to international, online, adult student populations to provide the academic context and background for the study. Following the context section, the rationale and significance of the study will be discussed, which will help link the research problem to potential beneficiaries of the research. The final section of the chapter includes the introduction and explanation of the problem statement, purpose statement, research question and theoretical frameworks which will serve as the lenses of the study.

**Context and Background**

Despite worldwide political and economic uncertainties, the US remains a stable economy. According to Ian Bremmer, president of the Eurasia Group, “From a stability perspective, when things are more unstable, the United States in some ways gets stronger” (Irwin, 2016). The US higher education system continues to attract one of the largest international student populations of any country. According to the Institute of International Education (2016a), there are close to one million international students attending US post-secondary institutions, and several thousand of these students are attending US institutions (through distance learning opportunities) from outside of the US (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2014).

Coulter and Mandell (2012) highlighted that non-traditional students now make up more than half of the undergraduate population within American higher education institutions, and the motivations and needs of this adult population differ from that of their traditional-aged counterparts. The reputation of the institution, along with other factors, makes up a primary reason for why an adult student would choose a certain post-secondary institution. According to
one survey, 83% of international students agreed that the reputation of the academics and degrees from US institutions remain a primary reason for why students continue to attend US-based degree programs (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2016b). With this growing international, online student population, it is important to understand how the changing demographics affect US institutions. Armed with a better understanding, institutions can improve supportive resources that will aid student development, persistence, and retention through their post-secondary programs and through to degree completion.

Student retention and persistence are vital components of how institutions are judged in the eyes of public, vital for the continued operation of the institution itself, and extremely vital for the career success of the institution’s student populations. Due to the growth and expansion of online education, and of non-traditional student populations, research that is aimed at how students are being academically supported will need to be conducted to better understand how student services factor into the retention and persistence of online, international student populations. Ali, Khan and Rehman (2012) mentioned that the quality of services offered by an organization is an important aspect of its competitiveness in the market. There is a responsibility for institutions to provide support that can aid these international students while they pursue degrees that can help them meet their personal and professional goals. This research study will explore perceptions of international student populations, and help determine how institutions can better respond to their needs, resulting in more effective practices that can lead to improved retention and persistence rates in US higher education institutions. Furthermore, knowledge in this area will be vital to improve student success outcomes and better assist this growing population at US institutions.
There is an abundance of available research on traditional-aged student populations. Many of these prior studies have analyzed how and where students are likely to attend post-secondary education, and how that may change according to their subject of interest (i.e. science, business, and others) (Cremonini & Antonowicz, 2011; Gachon, 2011; Gonzalez, Mesanza, & Mariel, 2011). Other studies have analyzed international student mobility patterns as it relates to the impact of that mobility on both students’ host- and home-nations’ knowledge-economies (Fahey & Kenway, 2011; Denman & Hilal, 2011). However, the use of online and Web 2.0 technologies are opening new doors for international students, allowing them to remain in their home nation while attending an overseas education.

Even though this international, virtual population continues to grow within US institutions, few studies have been conducted on or about this population. Additionally, even when studies are reported, they tend to focus more on the presence of these students, and not on their experiences while attending their degree programs. Research is needed to determine how the quality of online institutions, quality of online instruction and student perceptions of program outcomes are properly supporting students, helping them become successful, and following graduation, how these outcomes are developing global citizens.

**Rationale and Significance**

In an era of greater competition for vital financial and intellectual resources amongst colleges and universities, the international online higher education market represents a great opportunity for institutions to meet their financial and enrollment goals during a time of decreasing domestic enrollments. International student populations, complete with their unique challenges and barriers, represent a challenge for recruitment personnel. Additional barriers and challenges lie over the success and retention of these international, distance students. To recruit
and retain the growing international student population, US higher education institutions need a better understanding of the needs of these students, as well as more insight into how US higher education institutions can improve their services to better support these populations once enrolled. Not only will the retention and persistence of these students improve and develop their knowledge and skills, but it could also provide additional financial stability for higher education institutions in the current competitive market as student persistence and success could lead to more enrollments from this population.

To support student learning and development, institutions will need to be armed with information that can aid in the academic and professional development of these international populations. Research, such as this study, will be able to shed light on which students prefer which type of student support service, and how the support impacts persistence. Roberts and Styron (2010) noted that persistence and retention in higher education has a great deal to do with student perceptions and satisfaction. Wilkins and Balakrishman (2011) reported that the most influential elements of student satisfaction related to a couple of factors, including the quality and availability of services provided by their institution. Institutional administrators can use the information presented in this study to help create more effective student support services, increasing the ability for students to find success and support within distance education programs and institutions. Lastly, as much of the research being performed has focused on traditional student populations, this research study may be able to fill this gap in the higher education sector, and address these growing non-traditional student populations.

Student development and growth remains a primary concern for educators and higher education administrators. To support students in their goal of becoming global citizens, many institutions create missions and visions that call for a more diverse student body. Teichler (2004)
reported that changing regulations, such as the governance of institutions by a government (i.e. accreditors) could limit student mobility and knowledge transfer to different global economies. On an institutional level, the steering, managing and governing of institutions can be seen as a barrier to student mobility. As online institutions are not exempt from these regulations, it will be important to determine how their regulations are aiding or preventing student mobility and its overall economic impact. How an institution is perceived by international adult students is impacted by how institutions support their international student body, and using the insights in this study could provide a roadmap to institutions so that they can rise above these barriers and facilitate the development of global citizens.

As more adults throughout the world are returning to school for additional education and training, the study of international student success may be of primary importance to the higher education sector. Global economies are becoming more intertwined, and asynchronous communication has made the world more interconnected, institutions must become more adept at providing networking experiences, development opportunities, and knowledge transfer experiences. Berchem (1991) noted that as professionals and global citizens, students will graduate and work in a cross-cultural context where they will “need to have more knowledge not only of the social, cultural and economic realities, but also of the languages of partner countries” (p. 298). Many international adult students are looking for a competitive edge in their careers, and it is vital that research continue to explore and support these populations. Armed with this knowledge, institutions throughout the world can better support and train a more globalized citizenry.
Research Problem and Question

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of international student populations when using online student support services while attending online programs based in the United States. The experiences of online, adult, international students using student support services may help better define, explore and understand international student satisfaction, and how that translates into retention, persistence, and knowledge transfer.

Research Question

This study is designed to collect qualitative information from international, online, adult student populations to improve the understanding of the role of student support services. These insights may promote institutional changes aimed at better supporting this growing demographic in US higher education institutions. The research will be guided by this overarching question:

How do international, online, adult higher education students describe their lived experiences when using the virtual writing center services in their online international degree programs?

Definitions and Terms

For the purposes of this study, there are important terms that need to be defined. While the definition of “international student” is defined by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (2010) as students who travel to different countries for the purposes of educational study, this definition is outdated. In the digital age of higher education international students, in addition to those who physically travel to other countries for educational purposes, are also those who virtually-travel for educational purposes. One institution, for example,
defines their international students as citizens and residents of any country outside of the United States and its territories (Walden University, 2016).

**Other Key Terms**

In addition to defining what an international student is, this section provides additional terms that will be used during this study.

*Online degree* – This study defines online degrees as a degree program that is pursued using internet and web formats as the primary medium of attending degree programs.

*Student success* – This study recognizes that the concept of student success varies individually by student. However, the term student success is used in this study to frame the measure of academic achievement and knowledge improvement. This term does not imply a specific definition of success.

*Student services* – This study defines student services as departments and resources aimed at support students during their degree programs, but those which lie outside of the classroom (i.e. Blackboard) environment, including, but not limited to academic advising, career services, and writing center services.

*Student involvement* – This study defines engagement as the effort, interest and attention placed by the student during their degree program for the purposes of improving their knowledge and understanding.

*Retention and persistence* – This study defines retention and persistence as the continued enrollment of students in their degree program, term-over-term.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

This study employed two frameworks to address students’ use and experiences with virtual student support services. The frameworks are the student involvement theory (Astin,
1999) and Moore’s transactional distance theory (1980/1993). Astin’s (1999) student involvement theory was designed to explore the educational involvement, both cognitively and emotionally, by students in their degree programs. Moore’s transactional distance theory (1980/1993) describes the relationship between learner autonomy, dialogue, and the structure in distance education learning environments. These frameworks offer lenses with which to explore both the level of student involvement and how the nature of the distance education experience affects the level of learning taking place in online, international education programs.

**Student Involvement Theory**

Astin (1999) defined involvement as, “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (p. 518). This theory provides a valuable framework with which to explore which types of involvement help students the most, and how their experiences are altered because of the use of different involvement opportunities.

**Historical Trajectory, Contemporary Scholars and Applications.** The student involvement theory was published in 1984 by Alexander Astin, and evolved from a perceived lack of information about how students develop. Astin (1999) noted that he had become frustrated with the tendency of many academics to treat the student as a mysterious element within higher education, and as a result, many of the policies and practices of institutions did not fully translate into that student’s achievement or development. According to Astin (1999), the student involvement theory differs from other developmental theories that postulated either how student development happened in stages or viewed development in multidimensional terms. Astin (1999) further noted that the roots of student involvement theory lay in a longitudinal study of college dropouts, which Astin himself performed in 1974.
As a more recognizable name in student development theory, Astin has led the way for scholars and researchers to continue exploring student development theories. In a more recent contribution, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007) confirmed the findings of Astin’s research, and others, highlighting how some activities and experiences are linked to student persistence and increased commitment to the institution, leading to the earning of a degree. The application of this research could aid in the development of academic environments that can improve educational outcomes, it is clear that there is still a use of the tenets proposed in Astin’s student involvement theory.

**Basic Tenets.** According to Astin (1999), there are five basic tenets:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects,

2. Regardless of the object, involvement occurs along a continuum, that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object,

3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features,

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program, and

5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement.

These tenets provide the basis for the student involvement theory, and while all of the tenets created by Astin serve a purpose for the creation of an educational theory, this research study will not need to employ all of them.
**Seminal Authors.** In Astin’s (1999) explanation of student involvement theory, there is a list seminal authors that have added to the developmental theories that focused on development in a series of stages, including Heath (1968), Kohlberg (1971), Loevinger (1966), and Perry (1970). Kohlberg’s theory, for example, discusses development through the stages of morals, as each stage within a person’s life results in the development of morals, such as right, wrong, and justice (Sincero, 2012). Heath (1968) outlined his maturity theory, which states that as students grow from adolescence into adulthood, their experiences, relationships, knowledge and skills grow with them, creating a more autonomous individual.

Another set of developmental theories that contributed to Astin’s theory were those who focused on the development of a person in multidimensional terms, including Brown and DeCoster (1982) and Chickering (1961). Chickering’s theory illustrates seven vectors that students face during their time in undergraduate programs: developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing purpose and establishing identity (Clark University, n.d.). These vectors are not age specific and do not a predetermined path, but instead develop over one or more years of repeated exposure (Clark University, n.d.).

**Counterargument.** Astin’s work on student involvement has been the guiding light for a significant amount of research in the higher education sector. However, while the theory has been studied and the results duplicated, spawning other related student involvement theories, there are also counterarguments that go against the results of the various involvement theories. One counterargument offered by researchers is that there is no clear consensus on the definition of involvement. Astin (1985) refers to involvement as “the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects” (p. 36). “Objects,” however, lacks scope, and
researchers note that involvement can vary by individual and by degree, and a person may devote more energy to one “object” than another (Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway, & Lovell, 1999). Other counterarguments relate to what is missing in the student involvement theories, such as the connection between involvement and student development, a clearer definition of student development, and if students even want to be more involved on campus (Hernandez et al., 1999).

While the counterarguments provide some pushback to the student involvement theories, the notion that a student who is more actively involved throughout their educational experience does would likely have a better command over their academic performance, retention, and learning outcomes has been demonstrated in many studies. Knowing where to locate resources, finding any necessary support, and increasing the opportunities for larger networks are only a couple of the ways that greater involvement can lead to student success.

**New Light and Application.** The student involvement theory has led to the creation and expansion of several student development theories. Even though higher education continues to change, the importance of student involvement in their studies, both in and out of the classroom, remains vital for success. What remains to be seen is how student involvement is shaped in international higher education degree programs and their institutions. This theory can help provide a valuable framework with which to explore which types of involvement help students the most, and how their academic experiences are altered because of the use of different involvement opportunities.

**Transactional Distance Theory**

Transactional distance theory describes the relationship between learner autonomy, dialogue, and the structure of distance education learning environments. According to Moore (1993), “Psychological and communication spaces between any one learner and that person's
instructor are never exactly the same” (p. 22). This theory explores the changing nature of the relationship between instructors and distance education students, and the distance between the student and their educational environment.

**Historical Trajectory, Contemporary Scholars and Applications.** The transactional distance theory was initially published in 1972 by Moore. Moore (1993) noted that the theory addresses more than just the physical separation between a learner and the instructor, but also includes the concept of distance learning pedagogy. The initial concept of transactional distance was described by Dewey (1949) as the interaction between the learning environment and the learner, and how that interaction influences the behaviors of students and instructors (as cited in Moore, 1993). The distance, and the corresponding behaviors, affects the learning that is taking place in these environments. While not the father of the transactional learning concept, Moore’s theory has paved the way for other researchers to explore transactional learning. Following in Moore’s footsteps, Saba and Shearer (1994) and Gokool-Ramdoo (2008) have elaborated on Moore’s theory.

**Basic Tenets.** There are three interacting components of the transactional distance theory: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Shearer (2010) explained that Moore’s definition of dialogue is described as the extent that the learner and educator are able to respond to each other; structure is the extent to which objectives, procedures, and the implementation of the teaching program are prepared and/or adapted to meet the learner’s educational needs; learner Autonomy is the learning-teaching relationship that is established by the learner. The changing levels of interaction between the three variables effect the feeling of connectedness and learning that is taking place (Shearer, 2010). Shearer (2010) noted that the changing levels of components result in changing levels of transactional distance. Specifically, “at a macro level
the theory implies that as dialogue increases, transactional distance decreases, and conversely, as structure increases, dialogue decreases, and transactional distance increases” (Shearer, 2010, p. 1). Keegan (1993) mentioned that a fundamental aspect of the theory is the requirement by both learner and educator to engage in mutual dialogue in which knowledge is transferred between the different parties involved (as cited in Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008). A model of transactional distance adapted by Saba (2003) shows how a learner can persist along an educational continuum (see Appendix A, figure 1).

**Counterargument.** The theory of transactional distance provides an interesting lens through which to view distance education. However, according to Dron (2005) and Garrison (2000), the vague concepts of structure, dialogue and learner autonomy create issues for a clearer understanding of transactional distance. Garrison (2000) explained that as Moore’s definition of learner autonomy relates to the extent that the learner determines objectives and resources, it implies that autonomy is less a function of personal responsibility as a learner, and more about the learning materials that are present.

**New Light and Application.** As the seminal author of the transactional distance theory, Moore’s theory has provided a gateway with which to address distance education. While the theory continues to be scrutinized, it remains one of the most popular distance learning theories (Garrison, 2000). As distance education becomes a more popular option for students, and as technology continues to change the way that students interact with their institutions, it will be interesting to see how researchers and administrators continue to operationalize this theory in their educational environments. Gokool-Ramdoo (2008) highlighted that the transactional distance theory may help explain organization, curriculum, and even policy-related areas of distance learning systems.
Because of the distance between learners and educators, there may be a disconnection in the educational process that could impact student outcomes (retention, persistence and satisfaction). The transactional distance theory provides a frame for the virtual aspects of the topic, and helps explore how the distance between learner and educator might impact the learning experiences being had by the learner. In this sense, this theory continues to provide researchers and administrators an even greater understanding of how to better achieve student success in a virtual higher education environment.

**Utilizing Student Involvement Theory and Transactional Distance Theory**

This research study will utilize both the student involvement theory and transactional distance theory to explore the experiences that international, online students are having with virtual student support services. Given the complex relationship between distance students and distance student services, it is important to adequately frame the knowledge that will be generated from this research study. The two theories being used in this research study will complement each other, as they will touch on both student effort and the operation of the student support service being studied. Specifically, student involvement theory relates to the efforts of a student to connect to their university’s services and other aspects of their educational experience. Transactional distance theory, on the other hand, relates to the type and level of student support that is offered by the institution to its student populations. Using both theories will allow for this research study to better understand the complexities of online higher education by exploring how much effort is needed by the international student population to access and understand support resources, as well as the relationship between structure and dialogue of the student support service and its instructors.
Summary

With the model of higher education shifting, and institutions providing additional degree programs through distance education formats, institutions would benefit from understanding student persistence and success in these virtual formats. Compounding these structural changes to higher education institutions is the changing demographics, which includes the growing number of international, adult students in these virtual learning environments. The literature review in Chapter Two further explores the unique characteristics of international, online adult learners, and provides an overview of the body of knowledge surrounding learning in distance education formats, and student engagement activities provided by institutions. The research will be examined in the context of student support that contributes to international, online student persistence.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

With the rising enrollments of non-traditional international student populations entering US higher education institutions, there is a strong need to better understand, support and guide these students through to academic success (Tennant, McMullen, & Kaczynski, 2010). For institutions that have traditionally supported domestic student populations, the combination of changing demographics and the continued drive towards online and virtual models of higher education presents new challenges that did not previously exist. Even for institutions that have only ever provided online degree programs, the increasing number of international, multilingual students also presents new challenges. Online international students who are not familiar with the US higher education system, to say nothing of the potential language challenges they face, may lack the wherewithal to properly navigate this new and complex e-learning environment. Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, and Smith (2013) noted that many first-time distance learners are at risk due to the disconnection between students and institutional support resources in distance education programs. This inherent disconnection and distance between the institution and the learner space, creates many challenges that need to be addressed through additional research.

In an era of dwindling domestic enrollment, international student populations are sought after by U.S. higher education institutions looking to create global learning environments on campus. In recruiting these learners, questions regarding student success, quality, and access dominate many of the conversations within these institutions and throughout the higher education sector. In this increasingly asynchronous higher education landscape, these international populations will not only be attending physically, but also virtually, and as with all student populations, these students may need to access and benefit from support services in order
to guide them through their college careers, helping them to find professional success post-graduation. This growing population on US virtual campuses has institutions looking for ways to better support these populations. International student retention and persistence through to graduation remain hot-button topics throughout higher education, and identifying ways to better support all student populations will help further improve an institution’s quality programmatic and service offerings.

The following literature review addresses the various dimensions of the international online student experience, including an exploration into three areas of overlapping literature. First, the online higher education environment, explores the adult student population and their pedagogic needs. The second section considers the international context of higher education and addresses the importance of pursuing of US degrees by international, adult students. The final section will examine student engagement in an online space, exploring its limitations and opportunities. Each area will end with a summary of the literature contained within that section.

**Adult Students in Higher Education**

Once considered a small population on higher education campuses, the adult, non-traditional student has emerged as an ever-growing population. Coulter and Mandell (2012) highlighted that non-traditional students now make up more than half of the undergraduate population within American higher education institutions. With the changing population of higher education students, there comes changing student motivations and styles of learning. According to one study, many adult students chose to return to pursue an education because of the opportunity to improve their qualifications for future employment, and others were looking to change careers, using the education to obtain knowledge in careers that were interesting and stimulating (Osborne, Marks, & Turner, 2004). When Knowles (1984) described adult learners,
he identified four main characteristics, including, that they are self-directed, have extensive experience which is a foundation of their identity, are ready to learn and be engaged in the learning process, and are driven by specific goals.

While the characteristics of adult learners may not have changed, due to the different medium being used for learning, adult learning motivations, learning styles and engagement levels vary while attending online and distance learning education programs. For example, when researchers look to international student motivations, a great concern is the reputation of the school in question. According to Marginson (2006), foreign students are partial to the reputation of the institution they attend, and do not choose to go there only for their global presence.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that adult learners are not as familiar with study skills that would be needed, especially in a learning environment in which a great deal of autonomy is present (Bakare, 2012). In a study conducted on online versus traditional community college student success, Gregory and Lampley (2016) found that students in online courses are more likely to withdraw from a course. Results from this study, which were conducted on traditional and non-traditional aged students, demonstrate the at-risk nature of online international student populations. Learner support in online classrooms and their overall online environments are vital for student success, especially when working with international, online students who may not be familiar with successful study habits.

**Adult Students in Online Higher Education**

The transition back to college presents many challenges to students. However, online learning options present possible solutions. Technology has enabled students to learn on demand, and allow students to access resources and connect to others, regardless of where they are geographically (Kelly, 2013). These opportunities have opened the door for students who may
struggle with their personal/professional obligations. According to Brennan (2012), some students return to college through a university’s more flexible options, such as accelerated learning formats, and those that provide credits for life/professional experiences. These students may have different support needs, and understanding the needs of this population is the first step to framing the more complex topic of adult, online, international student success.

Non-traditional adult student populations remain an at-risk population in online higher education, and as Brown et al. (2013) noted, one of the reasons they remain at-risk is that there is an inherent disconnection between these students and institutional support resources. Due to the personal and professional demands of adult students, there are barriers that may impact their success, retention and persistence. Online learning models, due to their accelerated format, become an increasingly popular option for adult students. In lieu of face-to-face instruction, online models use what Salmon (2013) described as “E-tivities.” These electronic activities provide the opportunity for online students to increase engagement, and challenge and motivate students to critique, contribute, review, and consolidate their ideas (Salmon, 2013). In this type of interaction, students are posting discussions and responses to their classmates.

However, Anderson, Johnstone and McDonald (2014) highlighted that adult students tend to be weary of peer-to-peer interaction. The study contended that adults do not perceive peer information to be helpful and would prefer to learn from expert teachers instead of their classmates (Anderson et al., 2014). Anderson et al. (2014) studied adult students in traditional classrooms, and the results may not correlate to distant education programs. In a study of online learners, researchers suggested that the more the student interacts with the course content, the more likely that student will achieve higher success outcomes (Zimmerman, 2012). Additionally, in a study of adult students in Malaysia, the majority of respondents found group discussion and
participation most suitable (Sikor, Ibrahim, Hashim, & Madar, 2012). The requirements of adult students may have an impact on the structure of university support services and teaching methods.

**Pedagogic and Other Concerns**

Distance students, due to their familial and societal roles and responsibilities also contend with issues regarding their completion rates. Carnoy, Rabling, Castano-Munoz, Montoliu, and Sancho-Vinuesa (2012) revealed that completion rates may be linked to the type of program adults are enrolled into, suggesting that an individual in a specialized 2-year program is more motivated than a student in a general four-year degree program. The study suggested that universities could alter the structure of their degree programs, potentially enhancing the completion rates of adult students, as they may prefer programs that more easily fit into their personal lives and responsibilities (Carnoy et al., 2012). Saar, Taht, and Roosalu (2014) recommended that institutions create shorter duration programs, which could potentially lower institutional barriers, making it easier for adults to study, as well as afford their degree programs.

Online programs, while a potentially valuable alternative for adult students, are subject to the same questions regarding educational quality as traditional higher education programs. Joo, Lim, and Kim (2013) reported that social interaction, perceived usefulness of information that will affect their job performance, as well as ease of the use of technology were all considered persistence factors in online settings. Social interaction has been a long-time concern of distance education institutions and its students. A study of international distance students revealed that there were strong feelings of isolation, meeting expectations of the courses due to confusion, and lack of networking opportunities with other graduate students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Kuo, Walker, Belland, and Schroder (2013) mentioned that the interaction between learner-instructor
and learner-learner were significant predictors of student satisfaction in an online setting. Furthermore, Kuo and Bell (2016) reported that for students more confident with using the internet, more interaction was seen between the learner and the instructor, classmates, and the course content.

With greater attention paid to the design of online courses, and that of the interaction between peers and faculty members, institutions could enhance international student satisfaction and persistence rates. Additionally, providing greater clarity with how to use and access resources and content materials could help those students who do not possess a strong command of digital technologies. Along these lines, distance students have also reported an alienating effect on some distance education campuses, where the lack of interaction and applicability of knowledge and information to career advancement, caused students to seek out activities and organizations to supplement their educational needs (Joo, 2014). While Joo (2014) studied adult students on a physical campus, his research demonstrates that curricula may lack necessary educational components for some adult learners.

For effective programs that could encourage adult degree completion, as well as aid the greater applicability of that knowledge to a student’s career and their economy, institutions will need to consider ways to improve the pedagogy for their adult students. With student success being an institution’s focus, Joseph South, director of the Office of Educational Technology within the US Department of Education, describes that “it is impossible to redesign students to fit into a system, but we can re-design a system for students. This can be the difference between success or failure for our students that need the promise of higher education the most” (Lynch, 2017).

**Cultural Differences**
Outside of general curriculum, it is also important to note that when students pursue online education, other factors need to be considered, such as cultural differences between students, which may also be leading to persistence and retention concerns. Roberts and Styron (2010) noted that persistence and retention in higher education has a great deal to do with student perceptions and satisfaction. Satisfaction with one’s program can come in many forms, one of which is the cultural perceptions of international populations. When analyzing Chinese students in a distance MBA program, researchers noted that students were aware of the cultural differences within their curriculum, but that these differences did not affect their communication or collaboration with the learning taking place (Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010).

Outside of traditional cultural differences, the researchers also noted that the learning culture was different, and that the international students exhibited “modest, face-saving personalities in the group work and preferences for group work, whereas the U.S. students appeared to be independent, assertive and confident with a competitive attitude that dominated the group” (Liu et al., 2010, p. 185). A separate study confirmed that there is a strong relationship between a sense of community, perceived learning, and student satisfaction (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). From a student interest side, the study noted that students would like to have more social activities with their peers and faculty members, highlighting how students in an online setting find trust and community within the social interactions of the course (Lui, et al., 2007).

Institutions need to be aware of the challenges that online adult students face. In online, international, higher education settings, where students may not be communicating in their first language, the importance of recognizing these challenges become all the more important for administrators and student services supervisors. Paltridge and Starfield (2007) noted that there
are several issues when students write in English as a second language, including psycho-affective or emotional issues, behavioral issues, social issues and rhetorical issues. While this study was conducted on traditional US higher education campuses, providing services, support, and guidance resources can create the proper atmosphere for these students to find success in their degree programs. Furthermore, by providing the right atmosphere, encouraging the development of the student, institutions can significantly improve the value of distance education for their students. Bakare (2012) noted that some adult learners lack important study skills, and distance education in Nigeria sometimes inadvertently makes it difficult for students to attend who do not have a strong command of these skills. Bridging the gap for adult students could go a long way to connecting these non-traditional student populations with opportunities for advancement and success in their careers, regardless of the complexities of their lives.

**Summary**

In review, the literature underscores the at-risk nature of adult students in online higher education models. Online higher education models provide opportunities for students to advance their education, as well as become more impactful contributors to the growing knowledge society. However, in light of the literature which highlights the lack of proper navigation, study skills and an understanding of the online higher education environment, the need by many adult students to improve their economic and social mobility is creating a perfect storm in post-secondary education. Furthermore, the literature also highlights the stigma that still exists for virtual learning, and what non-traditional students need to contend with in order to add to their personal and professional development. This literature provides support for the development of more impactful student support services, in which online students would be able to be properly prepared during their academic pursuits. Sadik (2013) specifically notes that their research
suggests that further development of online programs could improve society’s acceptance, such as improving the student-instructors relationship and an evaluation of student academic progress.

**International Context**

Growing interest by countries and institutions to actively recruit international students, and subsequently retain these student populations is due in part to dwindling domestic enrollments. The development of students, preparing them for a global world, speaks to the heart of many institutions’ missions and goals. The development of the individual through international education is not a new phenomenon, and dates back to medieval universities, and perhaps even to the ancient Greek civilization (Berchem, 1991; Wildavsky, 2010). The American Council on Education (2011) clearly highlights the importance of international student development as they mention that:

> It is the obligation of colleges and universities to prepare people for such a [global] world, including developing the ability to compete economically, to operate effectively in other cultures and settings, to use knowledge to improve their own lives and their communities, and to better comprehend the realities of the contemporary world so that they can meet their responsibilities as citizens. (p. 14)

The continued globalization of world economies and markets has only further encouraged the expansion of international education programs, beyond just the invaluable altruistic reasons of the development of global citizens. However, the expansion of institutions, and the pressure of market forces on educational decision making is affecting how institutions are operating on a global scale (Stromquist, 2007). Specifically, educational decisions may be financial related, as researchers mention that one of the more motivating factors for institutions pursuing international enrollments is the need to earn more revenues, as state and federal funding
decreases (Rumbley & Altbach, 2016). Rumbley and Altbach (2016) noted that these internationalization measures are a way to improve the institution’s place in global rankings, as well as their country’s profile and building its reputation.

Improving an institution’s reputation, however, also presents a paradox in higher education institutional rankings that could be detrimental to the employment of its graduates. In the most recent Global University Employability Rankings published by Times Higher Education, employers generally agree that a degree from a top-tier institution is “not necessarily indicative that a graduate has the ‘essential skills’ for a professional environment… many recruiters feel compelled to defer to university reputation or rank in the first instance as a way to select from large numbers of applicants” (Minsky, 2016). With the growing pool of applicants with an international education, it is increasingly important for students to understand the importance of graduating from a university that has a global brand (Minsky, 2016). The following sections of this strand of literature will discuss the changing global landscape of international higher education and the address policies that regulations that have resulted in the proliferation of international, online degree programs.

**Policies and Regulations of International Education**

One of the reasons for the rise of globalization in higher education is due to the inclusion of distance learning as an economic indicator from the World Trade Organization (WTO). The WTO names education as a marketable service, subject to trade and service agreements, but with the goal of increasing access to education by international populations (Bold, Chenoweth, & Garmella, 2008). While many of the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS) relate to physical services, the WTO calls non-physical services cross-border supply, which covers distance learning, e-learning and purely online institutions (Bold, et. al., 2008). Several countries
have worked with the WTO to trade their educational services, one in particular, Australia, has made many efforts to trade higher education. The Australian government, worked with the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and having participated in the negotiations of the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) at the World Trade Organization, helped determine a set of rules in trading educational services, and also bridged the gap between its educational and immigration policies, making it easier to study in the country (Rizvi, 2011).

These policies have helped attract students from across the world, aiding knowledge and information transfer, but also aiding that country’s economy. Other efforts have taken place throughout the world, as attitudes towards adult students are changing. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, under New Labor governments, policies have been strengthening the relations between vocational programs and the universities (Esmond, 2015). Additionally, as of 2010, Further Education Colleges have been used by the UK’s Coalition Governments to broaden the range and scope of institutions in the kingdom (Esmond, 2015). Recognizing the needs of the European institutions to improve their curricula for lifelong learning, the European Commission (EC) has been making an effort to modernize. This effort, as part of the Lisbon Strategy, which intends to develop the European Union’s economy, will focus on three agendas: curricular, governance and funding reforms (Wysokinska, 2009). The EC recommends changes and revisions to policies that can aid in institutions in responding to knowledge and labor demands. Wysokinska (2009) points out that the EC has given greater autonomy to institutions, providing them a way to more quickly respond to situations. Even when these policies relate specifically to traditional institutions, there is a clear indicator that institutions need to modernize in a changing economic landscape (Wysokinska, 2009).
Pursuing Online International Education

The rise of globalization, and the need to have a populous educated with a global perspective, is changing that demographics of U.S. higher education institutions. Berchem (1991) noted that as professionals and global citizens, students will graduate and work in a cross-cultural context where they will, “need to have more knowledge not only of the social, cultural and economic realities, but also of the languages of partner countries” (p. 298). This sentiment was echoed by Ho, Lin, and Yang (2015) and Wysokinska (2009); skills acquired during international knowledge exchanges by students are essential for personal (student) and national success in the global marketplace, and crucial for the development of a knowledge society. To help students with educational opportunities, several different kinds of international opportunities are being pursued by U.S. higher education institutions, including offshore programs. These offshore programs are branch-campuses of traditional universities, and provide students face-to-face and hybrid degree-granting programs (American Council on Education, 2012).

While there have been successes with international partnerships and collaborations for the development of students among international higher education institutions, there are also financial dangers. Maslen (2015) highlighted that branch campuses in foreign countries can be problematic due to academic quality and financial risks, as well as issues with attracting students to these campuses. The means to attend these branch campuses, which may be closer to home for many international student populations, still presents issues for international students. Former Mexican president Ernesto Zedillo recently mentioned that there is a skills gap throughout the world, particularly with those who do not have the economic means to seek out education
opportunities. In these cases, and others, President Zedillo discussed that more education is needed to support these students in order to educate them, and the institutions that support these students will need to remain flexible and adaptive to their needs (An Interview with Ernesto Zedillo, 2016). In President Zedillo’s conversation, the role of private universities is also discussed as they relate to economic development. The president specifically mentioned that the involvement of private universities in emerging labor markets could produce competitive changes in the educational opportunities that exist within that nation, and result in positive changes to the quality of educational opportunities for those in the labor market (An Interview with Ernesto Zedillo, 2016).

**Acceptability of Online Degrees.** The degree one receives, from traditional international institutions or from virtual international institutions, is subject to similar concerns regarding the value and quality of the degree. The problem of obtaining a degree from a foreign country is an old and complicated problem, and several policies have been created over the years to tackle the issue (van Damme, 2001). As an example, national information centers have been set up throughout the European Union (EU) to serve as central locations that can facilitate recognition procedures from a national level (van Damme, 2001). However, centers like these are designed for intra-EU transfer of credit and recognition, whereas the US has a different system that uses very detailed procedures to recognize foreign degrees, leading to disputes and contention (van Damme, 2001). There is much work to be done regarding policies and regulations that could more easily qualify and recognize diplomas and degrees from other nations, aiding the continuing internationalization taking place (van Damme, 2001).

Taking online degree acceptability one step further, Zhang, Zhao and Li (2012) mentioned that in China, all students who are in online programs need to take a national exam
upon completion of their program, to demonstrate their competencies in several subjects. A commonly cited concern of online education is that there is not as much interaction as traditional, ground-based degree programs. A more recent study into the acceptability of online degrees outline that, at least for those seeking employment in student affairs professions, employers do not know many facts about online education and assume that interaction between peers and faculty are not possible in these settings (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Over the last few years there have sprouted several online degree programs and an overall increased presence of distance education opportunities at traditional institutions, suggesting that attitudes towards online education are already changing. However, there is also evidence that the feelings and beliefs about online education are more specific to one’s location.

Sadik (2013) studied the beliefs of the Arab world in relation to their perceptions of online degree programs. According to Sadik (2013), the majority of the research participants questioned the quality of online degrees available in the Arab world, believing that these programs could lead to dishonest practices, ignore admissions standards and do not promote a sense of academic community. While the quality of the programs and services that are offered by global institutions should be the primary concern, additional considerations need to be placed on the cultural impact that these programs will have in various countries.

**Cultural Impact of International Higher Education.** Coffey, Kamhawi, Fishwick, and Henderson (2013) specifically noted that an understanding and awareness of other cultures is required for changing organizations and world economic markets. Simultaneously, other researchers highlight the dangers of globalization on higher education institutions. Altbach (2015) noted that the rise of the internet and the use of knowledge a product to be traded, have relegated smaller nations and their institutions to the periphery, preventing them from increasing
their diversity in this competitive environment. Altbach did not reject the tenets of the globalization movement, but only highlighted the risks that the commercialization of the industry may impose on institutions throughout the world. Altbach is not alone addressing the concerns over the globalization of higher education. When it comes to the societal benefits of higher education, Kezar, Chambers, Burkhardt, and Associates (2005) cautioned researchers and practitioners on categorizing these benefits into neat domains, as this could create additional division and competition among institutions.

Despite these philosophical differences about the values of international higher education, many countries recognize their dire need for international voices. Picciano (2006) mentions that as more countries in South America and Africa enter the world economy, there has been a strong desire for better technology, more education and more fluency in the English language for their citizens. In a study of online collaborative learning, Lukman and Krajnc (2012) reported that students gained a deeper and more holistic understanding of the material being taught, as well as additional skills in the use of the English language. The students in the study mentioned that as virtual students they were forced to do the assignments alone, and in advance of the virtual discussions, and as such they were more prepared for the discussions (Lukman & Krajnc, 2012). In a separate study on virtual learning environments, students noted that interactions with students on the discussion board challenged their views and added other dimensions to the complexities of their work (Mundkur & Ellickson, 2012). Adding to a student’s understanding is a primary benefit of post-secondary education. As researchers and practitioners it is important to note the sometimes harmful affect that certain styles of curriculum can have on different societies.
**Western-style Curriculum.** While technology is altering the way that higher education can reach student populations, the many positive voices about globalization and providing international education are tempered by the view that globalization in higher education is a kind of academic capitalism. The view of the institution as a form of academic capitalism is to say that institutions are using globalization as a way to grow and create profit (Walker, 2009). The researcher suggested that the shifting realities of higher education are having, “detrimental effects on the academe; increasing work-loads, decreasing faculty-student ratios and face-to-face contact” (Walker, 2009, p. 506). However, while this article strikes a negative tone of international education, the author stresses that she does not deny the value of a global education, and is aware that institutions are not purely capitalist in nature (Walker, 2009).

A similar article outlines how the internationalization of US institutions is altering the pedagogic paradigm from one of a civic mentality to a more democratizing/individualistic one. Amthor and Metzger (2011) mention that in the case of globalized higher education institutions making their way into Eastern Europe, “students will be educated in dominant neoliberal contexts, internalize the dominant discourses, maximize individual gain at the expense of civic engagement, and in turn participate (willingly or unwittingly) in reproducing the structure” (p. 74). Even though this could be seen as a deleterious effect of globalization, there is evidence to suggest that institutions and their nations may not always see it as such.

Initiatives throughout Europe, such as the Bologna Process, were aimed at increasing student mobility throughout the EU, institutions trying to capitalize on the opportunity for transnational education have an interest in providing courses and degrees that are taught in English. Even though this requires a shift in policies and a significant financial effort to rewrite courses and materials, the opportunity to attract international talent cannot be overlooked (Gill &
Regardless of the views that exist on the role that globalization plays in higher education, the lifelong learning student remains at the heart of the matter. Sum and Jessop (2013) noted that the responsibility of becoming employable, and learning the necessary knowledge and skills has been transferred to the individual.

**Summary**

In review, this literature strand highlights the international context of higher education institutions. The growing drive towards greater recruitments of international students, both traditional and non-traditional, demonstrates the varying perspectives on the globalization of higher education. Even in light of the fundamental philosophical differences of viewing the globalization of US higher education (i.e. a public good or a capitalist tool), there still remains an underlying need to address the students currently utilizing global institutions to improve their professional competitiveness. Despite these varying opinions about US higher education, according to the most recent Global University Employability Rankings, based on surveys of recruiters and managing directors of international companies throughout the world, US institutions produce the most employable graduates (Minsky, 2016).

Nonetheless, this literature strand highlights the various perceptions of US higher education curriculum, and the affect that the massification of higher education has on different cultures. This aspect of the literature strand calls attention to the need for a continued development of services that can bridge the divide between various cultures, while promoting the altruistic origins of the higher education institution, such as serving the public good. It is also important to begin to highlight the changing views of the higher education institution in the midst of competition and the growing concept of a knowledge-based society. However, this lies outside of the scope of this project.
Student Success Services and Engagement in Global Institutions

International students who pursue online education options may feel isolated, due to their limited inability to engage academically or socially (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011). Within the growing context of global higher education, it is important that institutions take a more active approach to support and develop online international student populations. This section will explore engagement strategies and initiatives in place in higher education institutions, motivation factors of online students, and difficulties of engagement by these online populations.

Growing with Engagement Opportunities

Many institutions, especially those who have created online degree program options for students, are using student engagement initiatives aimed at more traditional student populations. However, while many institutions are realizing the importance of student services for these non-traditional populations, these students continue to challenge their institution’s leadership, remaining a concern student affairs professionals and administrators alike (Wyatt, 2011). Even though this challenge exists for institutions, many are recognizing that in addition to providing students with guidance, additional student services and engagement strategies can help market universities in an attempt to remain competitive. Hong Kong, as a growing education market, continues to make efforts to recruit more international student populations, learning from competitors and creating favorable policies that could result in greater enrollments and visibility (Cheung, Yuen, Yuen, & Cheng, 2010). Similarly, also recognizing the importance of distance education, Hashemite University in the Kingdom of Jordan has begun to employ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in order to develop e-learning technology and support practices to support their operations and students (Al-Khasawneh & Obeidellah, 2015). This strategic decision is just one of the results of the rapidly changing higher education environment.
The need for improvements in online learning instruction continues to be explored by other researchers, as well. Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, and Tamim (2011) argued that future generations of online learning environments need to facilitate more purposeful interactions, and mention that, “guided, focused and purposeful interaction goes beyond whether opportunities for interaction exist to consider especially why and how interaction occurs” (p. 98). Decisions to improve technology can have a lasting impact on higher education institutions. Lazerson (2010) noted that, “information technology has changed libraries, redefined research, made borderless education possible” (p. 108). The continued development of ICT within institutions helps make that institution more competitive on the world market, but once implemented, concerns continued to be raised about student success and retention. Lazerson (2010) highlighted that decisions about the development of information and communication technology are vague, in part because of clarity of purpose and underestimated costs of the technology initiatives.

**International Student Support Services**

As with other higher education populations, international online students need guidance on program structure, academic success strategies, writing tips and other academic support assistance. Because online higher education is so heavily geared towards the curriculum, some see no need for the development of other supportive online services. Moloney, of the University of Massachusetts, mentioned that some institutions are so eager to jump into the online modality with only their courses completed, that they neglect to prepare services for their students (Rowh, 2014). The available student support services and offices geared towards supporting international online students may have to go through changes in order to support this growing population. Sadykova and Dautermann (2009) reported that when international education moves into a
virtual space, many of the issues dealt with by traditional international support services, issues regarding housing and visa-related question, become less urgent to these students. As a result of this change, the responsibility of supporting online international students may shift from traditional international offices to others, “where policies have not previously accounted for international students” (Sadykova & Dautermann, 2009, p. 92). It is important to highlight the potential limitation that some institutions have when supporting online international higher education populations and how that affects quality support services.

As the quality of online higher education options remains under scrutiny, the presence of student services not only allow for the support of students during their degree programs, but are taken into consideration in the evaluation and perceptions of higher education degree programs (Stewart, Goodson, Miertschin, Norwood, & Ezell, 2013). Stewart et al., (2013) further notes that, “the provision of these support services, in turn, contributes to overall quality as recognized by the inclusion of student support in the numerous frameworks and standards for online course and program quality” (p. 301). Writing centers have helped support students, improving their intellectual engagement outside of the classroom (Bromley, Schonberg, & Northway, 2015).

**Online International Student and Support Services.** While it is widely believed that student persistence is tied to student satisfaction, there are few empirical studies that researched the phenomenon (Schreiner, 2009). Even with the relatively limited number of research studies about retention and persistence, there is evidence that suggests that for international student populations, institutional reputation is tied to value and quality, and also to their retention and persistence (Brown & Mazzarol, 2008). Combining the research regarding satisfaction and persistence, along with the previously discussed benchmarks to determine a high-quality online
program through the existence of student support services, it is possible to see a loose link between satisfaction, persistence and availability of support services.

In an online education environment, student support services help students by focusing on the interconnection and integration of knowledge transfer in students’ complex learning situations (Schumann, Tittmann & Tittmann, 2008). Schumann et al. (2008) identified a three-tiered knowledge transfer structure in e-learning environments, which includes the web-based training systems, followed by the network of faculty/training specialists, and ends with the user-support networks, which includes personal services for students. Personal services, as defined by Schumann et al. (2008), are coaching and tutoring systems that when linked to the rest of the multi-level knowledge transfer system, can facilitate effective knowledge transfer while using e-learning educational models. When it comes to international student populations, many do not seek out the support of student services because they are unaware of their existence, but also because some of these services do not exist in their home nations (Lee, 2013).

Student support services are a vital part of a student’s experience at the post-secondary level. However, despite the importance of these services, Brown et al. (2013) pointed out that there is a disconnection between a university’s services and first-time distance students. International students, who may not be familiar with the English language, might have an even greater disconnect to their institution’s support services. The value of learning English, especially as an online, international student studying “in” the US, cannot be overstated (Berchem, 1991; Coffey, et. al., 2013; Picciano, 2006).

The significant presence of social media in college students’ lives has lead researchers to ask about the feasibility of using social media, like Facebook, in order to develop international student language skills. Students, through the use of chats and discussions, were able to build
confidence, learn new words and have more positive experiences when learning the English language (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). Using Facebook to support a student’s knowledge and understanding of the English language, perhaps even as an extension of a university’s writing center, is still in its infancy. Kablian et al., (2010) indicated that there would need to be a more formal format added to the dialogues taking place on Facebook, helping create more concrete goals in order to help achieve student outcome goals. Amador and Amador (2014) confirmed these findings, and mentioned that even though students liked using Facebook because it provided access to advisors without the need to schedule an appointment, students were interested in using mechanisms beyond Facebook for academic support. Even among digital natives, such as millennial learners, there is an uncomfortability using informal learning tools such as Facebook to gain academic skills (Manca, & Ranieri, 2013).

The active discussions that can be used in Facebook and other social media formats relies on a synchronous interaction. However, virtual higher education environments have also created asynchronous learning and support opportunities or students in the form of tutorials. Bhandigadi and Abeywardena (2014) reported that virtual tutorials allow students to log in anywhere, as long as they have internet connection, and that all students had an equal opportunity to access resources and tutors. When it comes to asynchronous learning formats and other types of video-based learning opportunities, the lack of available bandwidth is a concern that is highlighted by Cangie and Cahill (2016), along with issues regarding the ability to easily search for information within these online webinars. Cangie and Cahill (2016) noted that video-based learning should not be considered a panacea, but can be helpful nonetheless. Ultimately, tutorials and other virtual support features have the chance to bridge the divide between students and support services, encouraging greater engagement and knowledge acquisition.
**Political Involvement in Social Media.** Social media has many benefits to online distance learners, not least of which is being able to connect learners and encourage greater interaction between students outside of the classroom (Hopkins, 2017). However, social media’s use both inside academia and out, may influence how people can use the technology for their educational benefit. In 2017, the Zimbabwean government created a ministry of Cyber Security, Threat Detection and Mitigation, which the government claimed was in response to a growing abuse of social media. Government spokesman Charamba noted that the abuse of social media has created a sense of panic and many have contributed to the destabilization of the economy (Dendere & Dionne, 2017). Many Zimbabweans feel that the creation of this ministry will impact their constitutional rights and limit freedom of expression (Nyoka, 2017). While these sources refer to the political landscape, should the use of social media be limited by the government, it may have deferential affects for online students studying in countries such as Zimbabwe.

Online students are also affected in larger world economies. The Chinese government has deemed certain websites, such as Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Google services, as being potentially dangerous, and are blocked during “periods of controversy” (Xu & Albert, 2017). While these examples signify what may happen when using social media for freedom of speech, other governments have proactively shut off internet outlets, citing education-based reasons. Ethiopia, in May of 2017, for example, closed its digital borders as a preventative measure to discourage the leaking of exam papers in secondary education schools. According to the article, this shut down was the third time such steps were taken. The first two shut down the internet, regionally, while this third time resulted in a complete closure of the nation’s digital borders (Hern, 2017).
While these examples do not specifically address global higher education, as the world continues to use social media on an over-growing scale, their continued use in countries that limit or close digital access, may impact their effective use by international, online distance students. The continued use of online platforms in higher education require that students attending those institutions have access to those support services to benefit their educational outcomes.

**Writing and Tutoring Centers.** While the true impact of writing centers on academic performance are not well documented, evidence suggests that there are positive outcomes associated with students who visit writing centers. In a study of traditional-aged student populations in a traditional higher education program, Bielinska-Kwapisz (2014) highlighted that of those students who utilized the writing center, the greatest impact on academic performance came from those who were in the top 40th percentile of grades. A separate study revealed that students believed that their time spent using the writing center improved their engagement and the persistence of their studies, as well as found described their experiences with the writing center as helpful (Ball, 2014). Even though these studies were performed with traditional students, it shows that there is an impact on student success when students utilize specific support centers. Student perceptions of these services can also help determine effectiveness of these support resources.

In a study of online student perceptions, it was determined that many students perceived course-level support (faculty members, tutoring, and library services) as important, while fewer students indicated that resources needed for unique needs (i.e. writing center, career services, bookstore) were important (Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, & Zhou, 2015). The researchers recommended that their institution consider writing coaches be assigned to students for specific
courses, rather than having a centralized writing center (Milman, et. al., 2015). In a study of experiences of online tutoring, a study revealed that students rated online tutoring poorer than face-to-face tutoring options (Price, Richardson & Jelfs, 2007). The researchers suggest that in cases of tutoring in courses with a multidisciplinary focus, the tutor may not have the expertise in all of those disciplines, limiting their ability to properly support students, and are being perceived as less competent (Price et al., 2007). Another consideration, in addition to tutor expertise, is the availability of tutoring and writing services. Given the nature of non-traditional adult students, in needing more flexible courses that fits into their personal and professional lives, Melkun (2012) recommended that asynchronous writing groups could help improve academic writing, while decreasing isolation among adult students and improving retention outcomes. Furthermore, non-traditional students are often unfamiliar with academic writing techniques, and these online writing groups could help them gain familiarity with this writing style (Melkun, 2012).

**Online Engagement for Student Success**

Prisloo and Slade (2014) outlined the risk that students who are not adequately supported can do to institutions, as they, “…pose an increasing risk for the sustainability of higher education” (p. 315). Support from the institution can go a long way to develop students and improve student outcomes. In online learning environments, where students use a greater amount of web-based technologies, there is evidence to suggest that students score higher on traditional-based student engagement measures (i.e. active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction and supportive campus environment), as well as more likely to demonstrate deep approaches of learning, such as higher order thinking and personal and social development (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010).
For students who are not aware of services and support features, proper training and guidance can help them develop necessary skills, such as time management and proper study habits. Academic advisors have long supported students in this capacity, and their importance to the development of student is well-documented (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Drake, Jordan, & Miller, 2013). Engagement with advisors, academic, faculty or other, is a great way for students to learn more about their programs and understand how to navigate important facets of online environment.

As higher education continues to change how courses are delivered to students, it is becoming clear that institutions are not always ready to support and engage students the way they need to be engaged (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Researchers suggested that greater use of videos and podcasts, and other discussion boards and sessions could help improve meaningful communication and enhance student learning (Revere & Kovach, 2011; Sherera & Sheab, 2011). However, even with these engagement initiatives in place, it is important to understand student motivations and perceptions when utilizing these online services, to determine if this impacts a student’s use of student support.

**Student Perceptions.** Through studies about student perceptions of learning environments, administrators, researchers and practitioners can better understand how to provide students with services and support that can result in a better accumulation of knowledge and greater levels of satisfaction and persistence. The identification of activities and types of engagement by students can provide some directions for possible recommendations. When surveying student perceptions of online engagement activities, Dixson (2010) found that there was no difference in the levels of engagement between active (i.e. virtual teams, games, case studies) or passive (i.e. reading, quizzes, video lectures) activities. Dixson (2010) also
highlighted the importance of a social presence, and that both types of activities can encourage greater levels of interaction and engagement.

The satisfaction of students was also found to be linked to anxiety levels. Bolliger and Halupa (2012) noted that students with anxiety in online learning environments reported less satisfaction with their degree programs. In light of these perceptions, Bolliger and Halupa (2012) recommend that online instructors create more purposeful approaches and planned interventions to decrease the anxiety levels of online students. When students have positive online learning experiences, evidence suggests that retention and success rates improve and barriers to learning decrease (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012).

Another important aspect of student perceptions of online support services is the digital divide that exists amongst student populations. Junco (2007) highlights that how people access computers and online learning resources vary because of their socioeconomic level. Data collected by Junco (2007) from the Pew Research Organization and National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) highlighted the use of internet for education varies among gender and ethnic backgrounds, with males using internet to a higher degree than females, and that Latinos and African Americans use the internet less than Caucasians and Asian Americans. Junco (2007) acknowledged that discrepancies may exist, as data from the Pew Research Organization and the NTIA, as the NTIA is more representative of US Census data, while the Pew Research studies rely on interviews that are conducted in English, possibly skewing some responses.

**Student Motivations.** The study of student motivation is vital to understanding students in online higher education, as it is with traditional-based models. However, Chen and Jang (2010) warned against labeling online students into broad categories, such as “motivated” and
“unmotivated.” While the study of self-determination theory in online learning environments failed to prove a link between motivations and learning outcomes, the study did reveal that there an association between student engagement and need satisfaction, and a direct link between contextual supports (interactions with educators) and course satisfaction (Chen & Jang, 2010). Additionally, Park and Choi (2009) mention that online learners are less likely to drop out when they were satisfied with courses, as well as when the content of those courses were related to their personal and professional lives. Should the results of these studies be corroborated by others, perhaps evidence will be generated that links engagement to satisfaction levels, which could better inform scholars and practitioners about ways to improve persistence, retention and student outcomes.

In addition to motivation studies during degree programs, other studies have sought to understand the motivation behind the choice of degree program to pursue. Clayton, Blumberg, Auld (2010) explored how students’ goals, self-efficacy and learning strategies impacted their choice to attend an online or traditional degree program. The study determined that students who chose traditional models of higher education showed greater mastery of goal orientation and placed greater interest in expending effort towards learning in their classrooms, while those who chose non-traditional degrees felt they were able to be academically successful in those courses (Clayton, et. al., 2010). While the study focused mainly on the motivations behind the choice of degree, the researchers do highlight an important facet of student perceptions. Interestingly, students who perceive themselves to be more self-motivating and geared more towards self-efficacy are less likely to seek support from peers or instructors (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).
Summary

In review, this literature strands discusses both the student perceptions of engagement opportunities, as well as the opportunities that are presented to students by higher education institutions, including virtual writing and tutoring centers. Learning in an online environment continues to be a direction that many adult students take. This strand calls attention to the fact that while many students need support and guidance to help them adapt, learn, grow, and gain proficiency and competency in a subject, student support services are available, but not always called upon. Furthermore, this strand reveals a lack of online tutoring and writing center research, highlighting the need to explore this area of the changing higher education learning environment.

Conclusion

Increased interest by institutions to recruit and enroll international, online students is transforming the higher education landscape, and fundamentally changing the way that support services can guide and support these student populations. As student retention and success continues to take a front row seat to how institutions are perceived, it is important that US higher education institutions seek out best practices and identify specific support services that result in greater persistence, retention and student success outcomes. This literature highlights the adult student learner, how the online learning environment is changing the nature of higher education for these international, adult student populations, and engagement opportunities and motivations that are available for online students. The literature also reveals that even though distance education, and subsequently, online education, are not new concepts, the online, international student population is a relatively new challenge that is presented to US higher education institutions. The need for a better understanding of this population is warranted by the
revelations provided by this literature review, offering up the chance to gain additional information about the experiences these students as they seek out support during distance education programs.
Chapter 3: Research Design

According to a recent Open Doors Report (2015), international student enrollments into United States (US) higher education institutions continue to rise. As greater numbers of international students are choosing to attend US institutions, concerns over student success, educational quality, and retention and persistence outcomes remains a hot-button topic throughout higher education. This study explored the experiences of international, online adult students that utilize virtual student services during their virtual degree program, with the aim of identifying services that can improve retention and persistence within these virtual populations. The research design employed in this study is transcendental phenomenology. The following chapter describes the research design employed by this study, and provides a framework for the methodology chosen by the researcher. The first part of the chapter will focus on the research approach. The second part of the chapter will focus on the structural elements of the project, including procedural information, methods for data analysis, ethical considerations, trustworthiness, a positionality statement, and possible limitations.

Research Question

The main research question for this study is: How do international, online higher education students describe their lived experiences when using virtual student support services? The collection of data for this question is aimed at better understanding the utilization of services that are designed to support students during their college careers.

Qualitative Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative research design to define the phenomenon and research question that is being studied. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) make note that qualitative research is,
“a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 3). These observations are aimed at making the world more visible, in order to make sense of and/or interpret the natural world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In this context qualitative research is conducted through prolonged contact with research participants and in a setting that that investigates the lives of individuals, groups and societies (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This prolonged contact with individuals and groups can help the qualitative researcher better understand how study participants view the world, as well as how they interpret meaning from their experiences. The opportunity to connect with the participants and seeing the world from their viewpoint provides a chance to bring some understanding to the complex relationships that exist between people and their environments (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm guides the researcher through the perceptions and experiences of those researched (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The goal of this study was to ascertain the experiences and perceptions of specific populations while they are utilizing a student service. Their interaction with this phenomenon needs a detailed understanding of their experiences. Creswell (2013) noted that qualitative research methods are employed to explore, address, and identify variables that are not easily measured. The discovery of experiences through interactions with participants will aid the research study, and link experiences and perceptions with service quality improvements. According to Ponterotto (2005), it is only with the interaction of researcher and participant, “can deeper meaning be uncovered” (p. 129).

According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological research studies uncover common meanings for individuals as they experience a certain idea, concept or phenomenon. How students perceive their campus and the services that are provided can affect their satisfaction and persistence at that institution. Wilkins and Balakrishman (2011) reported that some of the most
influential elements of student satisfaction relate to the quality and availability of services provided by a student’s institution. With online higher education options growing in popularity, examining the experiences of these students can help researchers and administrators alike, determine how best to structure and improve these services in order to best serve this population and ultimately improve student retention and persistence of all types of student populations. The following sections outline the philosophical and historical underpinnings of the phenomenological approach, intended outcomes, and how this approach shaped the questions, data collection and data analysis used for this research study.

**Phenomenology’s Philosophical Underpinnings**

The earliest known reference of the term phenomenology is Immanuel Kant (1764); however, the modern adaptation of the phenomenological approach can be traced back to Edmund Husserl (Priest, 2002). According to Priest (2002), Husserl’s goal was to delve into the nature of philosophical enquiries, and believed that all knowledge was derived from personal experience. Husserl discussed that how an individual views an object or an event (phenomenon) involves two main elements, “noema” and “noesis.” According to Husserl, noema refers to the process of experiencing something, and noesis refers to the content of the object itself (Cerbone, 2010). Following Husserl’s initial work on the subject, another philosopher, Martin Heidegger, continued the work on trying to better understand the lived experiences of individuals, and introduced the idea of being in the world (Groenewald, 2004).

The phenomenological research approach is based on the belief that an individual person creates the structure and essence of phenomena, and thus to understand the phenomena, the researcher needs to explore that person’s lived experiences (Priest, 2002). The approach of transcendental phenomenology, according to Moustakas (1994), requires the researcher to seek
out and compile information from people who have experienced a certain phenomenon, and attempt to describe what they experienced and how they experienced it (as cited in Creswell, 2013).

**Varying Phenomenological Approaches.** The scholarly debate within the approach is between the two major phenomenological approaches, transcendental and hermeneutical. The transcendental approach focuses on essential experiences of the participants, and not on the researcher’s interpretation of the experiences. This approach follows Husserl’s original definition of pure phenomenology, which states that, “all knowledge should be based on absolutely certain insights,” and that it is through the descriptions of the world that we can grasp knowledge about it (van Manen, 2011). Through the hermeneutical approach, on the other hand, the researcher plays more of a role in the understanding of the lived experiences of the participants within a study.

One researcher, van Manen (1990), stressed that phenomenology is not just the description of the phenomenon, but also includes an interpretive process in which the researcher interprets the meaning of the experience described (as cited in Creswell, 2013). According to Embree’s Encyclopedia of Phenomenology (1997), the hermeneutical approach most closely aligns with the methods followed by Heidegger (as cited in Linsenmayer, 2011). Instead of seeing this approach as being an extension of Husserl’s pure phenomenology, Heidegger actually rejects the notion of the possibility that individuals can “bracket” out their presuppositions, and that to discover truth and knowledge researchers must utilize their understanding of the phenomenon during the research process (Cerbone, 2010).

Since both transcendental and hermeneutical approaches fall within the overarching phenomenological approach, the goals of exploring the lived experiences of a phenomenon
through the descriptions of research participants remain the same. However, since each varies in how they approach the interpretation the results, there is a difference in the general structure of the research process. Specifically, as hermeneutical phenomenology includes the researcher’s meaning in the description, the researcher sets aside time before each study to more fully understand and reflect upon a phenomenon. Through this method, researchers can better understand the essence of the phenomenon, and thus better prepare to ascribe meaning to the experiences that are shared by participants (Kafle, 2013). Using transcendental phenomenology requires a separation between the researcher and the phenomenon, a process called bracketing or phenomenological reduction. Hycner (1985) described bracketing is a conscious effort to see the phenomenon as it is, and not “an example of this or that theory…” Hycner (1985) further explains that a good habit for researchers using bracketing, would be to list possible presuppositions in order to help remove as much of a bias as possible when interpreting the lived experiences of the participants.

Looking at other qualitative approaches, phenomenology shares both similarities and differences. When compared with Grounded Theory and Discourse analysis, all three methodologies address questions of meaning and understanding. However, phenomenology’s goal is to address the lived experiences of those who have experienced a phenomenon, discourse analysis seeks knowledge and meaning through interactions, and grounded theory tries to develop theory bases on social processes (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007). The goals for these various methodologies flow from their philosophical perspectives. In phenomenology, knowledge and truth is subjective, and individuals create meaning through their experiences. Within the discourse analysis method, it is language is where meaning and understanding are derived. Researchers of discourse analysis believe that through shared languages of people,
societies and cultures, meaning is created and reality is constructed. Lastly, grounded theorists believe that meaning is created through interactions with others in social processes. It is through observing social interactions of behaviors and speech practices that knowledge about an issue is understood (Starks & Brown-Trinidad, 2007).

Data Collection through Phenomenology. The phenomenological approach, as one of the qualitative research methodologies, utilizes an interview approach when gathering data for a study. Priest (2002) mentions that interviews, along with a verbatim transcript of audio-taped interviews, are the most usual data source for phenomenological studies. Since the phenomenological approach seeks the lived experiences of interview participants, the interview format provides a subject-subject relationship, instead of other approaches which are closer in line with a subject-object relationship (Englander, 2012). Priest (2002) and Lester (1999) mention a variety of other methods for collecting data when utilizing the phenomenological approach, including group discussions, written accounts or diaries, participant observation, action research, focus meetings and analysis of other personal texts. The most important criteria for phenomenological research, according to Giorgi (2009), is that it provides an as complete description of the experience that the participant has had with the topic or issue in question (as cited in Englander, 2012). Even though there is not a set length requirement for an interview to be considered in-depth or “good,” in order to obtain these detailed accounts, phenomenological studies tend to have longer-length interviews. By extending an interview’s length, researchers can capture a significant amount of data (Englander, 2012).

When using the interview process, one researcher noted that his first step is to have a preliminary meeting with participants, in order to establish trust, review consent forms and review other ethical considerations. In addition to the establishment of trust, this conversation
can provide the participant an opportunity to review the research questions, giving him/her a chance to think about the questions that will be asked (Englander, 2012). In the second and third phase of the data collection process, the interviews are audiotaped and verbatim transcriptions are created for analysis (Englander, 2012). In one example of a phenomenological study, researchers mention another round of interviews. These subsequent interviews were conducted during the data analysis process, providing the opportunity for participant feedback and the opportunity to expand and verify the information gathered from the interviews (Newton, Boblin, Brown, & Ciliska, 2006; Hycner, 1985).

**Data Analytics through Phenomenology.** After collecting the data, the next phase in the research design of a phenomenological study is to analyze the results obtained. After reviewing the literature on the design of phenomenological studies, it is clear that are several approaches to the analysis of the data, but also many commonalities among the various methods, once the interview data has been transcribed and documented.

First, researchers make note that an initial understanding of the researcher about the topic is vital (Hycner, 1985; Priest, 2002). Priest (2002) specifically noted that an initial reflection of the phenomenon and various ideas present in topic need to be understood, in order for the researcher to better understand his/her presuppositions, assumptions and possible biases. This process, known as “epoche” or phenomenological reduction, directs the researcher’s attention to the phenomenon being studied, and not its origins, source, etc., but rather how it currently exists (Cerbone, 2010). As a second step, Priest (2002) references the importance of coding the data, and highlighting main ideas from the interviews in order to develop a list of statements.

Hycner (1985) also followed this highlighting process, which helps the researcher construct the meanings and contextual clues regarding the topic from the participant’s
perspective. Hycner (1985) further noted the importance of returning to the transcription data for verbal and non-verbal meaning, and as part of the analysis process, researchers should document these cues for an even greater understanding of the meanings behind these cues. Once all of the data has been analyzed for meanings, researchers attempt to cluster similar pieces of information together into significant themes. Hycner (1985) mentioned the importance of clustering ideas together, but also highlights the dangers, as this part of the process requires the judgment of the researcher on which pieces of the data should be clustered together. More than any other part of the analysis process, this phase may cause the researcher’s presuppositions to interfere with the analysis (Hycner, 1985).

The final step in the analysis process employed by researchers is to validate the information. One way in which to validate a participant’s information is by re-interviewing that participant. Hycner (1985) discusses how the use of an interview that reviews initial interviews and shares the summary of themes and clusters that emerged from the data collection, should be shared with that participant. With this concluding interview, the researcher can confirm the accuracy of the information, but also allow the participant to share additional information about the phenomenon, helping to further validate research findings.

Rationale for Phenomenology

This study explores the experiences of online, international students when utilizing a specific student service. The use of transcendental phenomenology will be used in order to understand how these students experience the phenomenon as it exists. According to the Smith (2013), transcendental phenomenology seeks to understand an observer’s conscious and intentional experience of something. In transcendental phenomenology, the question is not if something exists, but how that something exists (Smith, 2013). The use of transcendental
phenomenology can help provide an in-depth understanding of how participants perceive the phenomenon.

Transcendental phenomenology is used in this study to provide a fresh perspective on the experiences of the phenomenon and acquire the essence of the experience that is being had by the participant. Moustakas (1994) mentions that the setting aside of presuppositions about the phenomenon allows the researcher to see the phenomenon from a new and fresh perspective (as cited in Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This approach further enhances the understanding of subjective experience, gain insights into motivations and actions, and the chance to address contemporary assumptions that exist on the phenomenon (Lester, 1999). Due to the ability of the phenomenological approach to challenge assumptions about international, online higher education through personal experiences, make it a valuable approach for this research topic and research study.

**Participants**

Phenomenological research is generally performed by utilizing the experiences of individuals when interacting with a certain phenomenon or event (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990). This means that a sample size for phenomenological research can vary, so long as the individuals selected have experienced the phenomenon. This study sought to collect data from interviews with eight to ten participants who have experience using their institution’s virtual writing center.

**Participant Characteristics**

For the purposes of this research study the participants will need to have direct experience with the phenomenon being studied. Englander (2012) pointed out that phenomenological research seeks to understand the phenomenon through experiences, and thus
the participants need to have at least a general knowledge of that phenomenon. Since this study explores experiences when utilizing a virtual tutoring center by international, adult, online graduate students, this study will recruit students who identify as international, adult, online students. Given the nature of the research study, the research population can include a heterogeneous population of international, adult online students.

International, online students are those who do not reside in the US, but have chosen to pursue a virtual degree program from a traditional US higher education institution. Even though the research site is a traditional institution, many academic degree programs are offered in a virtual format. The study will utilize international students from countries that indicate that English is their primary language or spoken by a significant portion of the population (i.e. Nigeria, Jamaica, India), and from countries whose primary language is not English and not spoken by a significant portion of the population (One World Nations Online, 2016). For the purposes of this study, online degree programs are those which are asynchronous in nature. Haslam (2016) noted that asynchronous refers to online learning that does not require the student and instructor to be online and logged into the classroom at the same time. Participants who will be selected for this study will be actively pursuing an online graduate degree program from a regionally accredited higher education institution. Online degree programs require a high proportion of assignments to be written and turned in electronically.

Lastly, this study will recruit participants who label themselves as adult students. It is generally accepted that the term adult student refers to students who are over 24 years of age, who often have additional responsibilities beyond their education, such as work or family responsibilities (NCES, n.d.). For the purposes of this study, participants will selected who are
enrolled international, adult graduate students who have completed at least one year of coursework, and have experience using their institution’s writing center services.

**Participant Summaries**

Participants who met the criteria for this study came from New Zealand, Canada, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ireland, Zimbabwe, and Italy. This convenience sample was made up of 100% adult students, and included six males and two females. All of the participants had utilized their institution’s writing center services.

Participants were initially contacted using LinkedIn, in order to confirm that they met the criteria for this research study. Several international students were contacted and volunteered to participate in the study. However those who had not utilized their virtual writing centers were excluded. Once it was determined that these participants met the criteria, interviews were set up using WhatsApp and Skype meetings.

**Adam.** This participant lives in Ireland, and works full time in the information technology sector. He is employed full-time, and has over 10 years of experience working in this sector. After pursuing his MBA from an online institution, this participant is pursuing his doctorate degree from a US-based higher education institution. He was motivated to pursue a degree “in” the US in order to better understand a gap he noticed in his field.

**Jack.** This participant lives in Canada, and works full time in the information technology sector. He has a master degree from another online institution, and due to his full-time management responsibilities, decided to pursue a US-based doctorate degree virtually. This participant was motivated to attend his online program in the US because of that university’s mission and vision statements, as well as having the degree and specialization that will directly support him in his field.
Angie. This participant lives in Italy, and works full time in the cybersecurity sector. She completed her bachelor degree from a traditional institution in Italy, and decided that it was best for her career to pursue a cybersecurity degree in the US. Her online institution possessed the degree she needed for her career.

George. This participant lives in New Zealand, and is self-employed, working full-time in a sales and marketing capacity, supporting large companies, in New Zealand and around the world. At the time of the interview, the participant had completed his bachelor degree from a US-based online university, but was planning on being enrolled at the same university for his MBA degree in the near future.

Buddy. This participant lives in Nigeria and works full-time in the public health sector. Having received certificates and degrees in his home nation, he decided to pursue his doctorate virtually, from an online institution in the US.

Gino. This participant lives in Nigeria and works full-time in the public health sector. Pursuing an online degree allowed the participant to remain working full-time as he worked towards his advanced degree.

Steve. This participant lives in Zimbabwe and works full-time in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as a coordinator. He pursued his master degree from a US-based university in business administration in order to improve his knowledge of business leadership and improve his organization’s workplace environment.

Audace. This participant lives in Rwanda and works full-time. She decided to pursue a degree in the US in order to obtain a more international focus for her understanding of her career field, and decided to pursue a degree in technology and communication.

Data Utilized
The primary type of data that will be used for this study will be web-based, one-on-one interviews with selected participants, as well as recorded phone calls with those participants who preferred to be contacted using the WhatsApp application on smartphones. Nicholas, Lach, King, Scott, Boydell, Sawatzky, Reisman, Schippel, and Young (2010) noted that internet-based interviewing can provide a greater sense of personal security and increase disclosure and transparency of information. However, in their study of the contrasting experiences of internet-based and face-to-face based interviews, Nicholas et al. (2010) mentioned that online participants reported less satisfaction with the relationship that was formed with peers. Wertz (2005) further writes that interviews are useful when the structure, scope and nuances of the topic are complex, where the participants are not likely to spontaneously respond to the questions asked. Interviews provide a wealth of perspectival data from the participant that is related to the phenomenon being studied. However, in order for interviews to be authentic and thorough, good rapport and trust needs to be established. Without good rapport, interviews may lack substance and authenticity (Wertz, 2005).

**Sampling Procedures**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. The nature of phenomenological research requires that the participants of a research study are selected due to their familiarity with the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). For this purpose, the participants were selected purposefully because they share a common experience. Efforts are taken by the researcher to consider other factors during participant selection, including gender and geographic location. Participants were recruited following these steps:
1. A direct recruitment email was sent to participants via LinkedIn (Appendix B). This email will briefly describe the research study, and provide an opportunity for interested students to ask follow-up questions directly to the researcher.

2. A subsequent recruitment email was sent a week later to all participants who meet the criteria, in an effort to maximize the response rate (Appendix C).

3. The researcher sent personalized emails to the participants who were interested in participating in the research study, providing additional information about the study. This communication also contained the informed consent form (Appendix D), interview guidelines (Appendix E), and ask participants for interview times that work for them.

Participants will be offered a $10 Amazon.com gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Research Site

There was no specific research site used for this study. Given the nature of the research study, participants are required to have attended US-based higher education institutions, and have attended those institutions online, and while they live and work outside of the US. This criterion can include any type of US higher education institution, including purely online institutions, as well as brick and mortar institutions that have fully online degree programs. All of these institutions have online writing center services, and offer those services in different ways to their student populations. Some of the writing center services offered at these institutions include workshops, webinars, tutorials, and writing tutor services aimed at providing students with support while writing in English, proper citation techniques and guidelines, and other academic writing skills.
Procedures

The procedures for data collection, organization, analysis, and synthesis followed in this study, are influenced by the use of the transcendental phenomenological approach. The following section outlines the procedures that were used in this research study.

Data Collection

IRB approval for this research project was granted, and data was collected three phases. The three phase approach follows Seidman’s (1998) suggestion that three interviews should provide an appropriate amount of research data. All interviews were recorded, with the participant’s permission, with an audio recorder and the Skype recording feature that captured the audio components of the interview. In the first phase, the researcher assessed the participant’s experience with the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 1998). Additionally, this first interview helped build trust and rapport by beginning with a social conversation, in order to create a more welcoming atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994; Osborne, 1990). Following this initial conversation with participants, phase two of data collection will begin. In the second interview, the researcher engaged the on their current experience with the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 1998). The interviews conducted in phase two were the primary source of data collection about the phenomenon.

These in-depth interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes, and ask open-ended questions aimed at encouraging dialogue with the participants. Osborne (1990) noted that minimally structured interviews are more likely to encourage dialogue and provide additional data that might otherwise be missed. Follow up and prompt questions were available for use by the researcher, however, they will only be utilized when the participant needs to be prompted for additional information (Osborne, 1990). The final phase of data collection combined the
information of the previous two interviews, enabling a more complete understanding of the phenomenon through the participant’s perspective (Osborne, 1990). Upon completion of the data collection process, participants were provided the transcripts in order to verify and confirm the content. Should the participants have questions about their collected data, subsequent conversations would have been arranged in order to correct and amend the data. The final interview also provides the opportunity for researchers to better understand the effect of a participant’s participation in research studies. Koelsch (2013) noted that asking and answering questions can have a transformational effect on participants, and even if the aim of the research study is not social change, it is vital to understand how participants have been changed by their participation experiences.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis of this study followed the structure presented by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas (1994) outlines the analysis structure following the transcendental phenomenological approach, which is utilized in this research study. A primary tenet of transcendental phenomenology is the separation of the researcher’s feelings, beliefs and biases about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). The steps taken in the data analysis when following transcendental phenomenology are designed to bracket out the researcher’s experiences and discover essence of the phenomenon by participants. The analysis of the interview transcripts, coding techniques, locating significant statements, and the clustering of themes utilized the MAXQDA software. Outlined below is the four-step process for the data analysis that was used in this study.
Step One

Step one of the data analysis involved the separation of the researcher’s biases and presuppositions about the phenomenon. According to Moustakas (1994), first person reports regarding their experiences of a phenomenon are essential in phenomenological research. In light of this fundamental tenet, researchers first engage in a process known as *Epoché*. This process allowed the researcher to be bias-free, and can prevent a researcher’s personal experiences and knowledge of the phenomenon to interfere with the reality derived from the participant’s perspective (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). In this first step, the interview recordings were transcribed using word processing software, and organized and saved on the researcher’s computer and external backup system.

Step Two

Step two involves the review and analysis of interview transcripts through the creation of significant statements. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as phenomenological reduction. Yuksel and Yildirim (2015) described that in the reduction process, “the researcher must eliminate all elements that are not directly within conscious experience” (p. 7). During this step, the researcher identified specific statements from the interviews about how participants experience the phenomenon. These statements represent the true descriptions by the participants, and are non-repetitive and non-overlapping. In this step the aim is to simply identify the individual statements, and no attempt is made to analyze these statements (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The significant statements were located using first and second cycle coding techniques.

The researcher will use both *In Vivo* and *Descriptive* codes as first level coding techniques, in order to highlight significant statements. Miles, Huberman and Saldana (1994)
mention that the uses of In Vivo coding methods help preserve the subject’s voice, helping isolate terms that could identify possible culturally-significant responses of the subjects. Second cycle coding is used as a way to summarize these responses into smaller categories and themes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 1994).

**Step Three**

The third step reviews the significant statements for themes and meaning units. These clusters and significant themes aid the researcher in determining which themes are consistent and common amongst the participant’s statements (Hycner, 1985). The analysis of themes provided the researcher with descriptions of what was experienced with the phenomenon, and how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants. These textual and structural descriptions of the phenomenon varied between researchers highlighting the various perspectives and frames of reference (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, the researcher utilizes imaginative variation, in which intuition and understanding of the phenomenon is not viewed empirically. It is from this imaginative variation that structural descriptions are formed (Moustakas, 1994).

**Step Four**

In step four, the textual and structural descriptions are combined into a composite description which forms the essence of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The essence of the experience is described by Moustakas (1994) as the quality and conditions that make up the phenomenon as we know it. Specifically, this step will provide the complete meaning of the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher will plan to provide these contextual descriptions to the participants. Hycner (1985) notes that sharing these contextual descriptions with the participants can help validate and confirm the lived experiences of the participants.
Ethical Considerations

All participants will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. The selection of a pseudonym will protect the identities and names of the participants involved in the study (Creswell, 2013). All files, audio and written, were saved on the researcher’s personal computer and an external backup file will be used to store the collected data. A master list was also be created in order to document all audio and written documents obtained or created for this research study. Davidson (1996) mentions that a data collection matrix can also be created as a way to visually locate and identify the information for the study (as cited in Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

In order to present a trustworthy study, the researcher used several measures to ensure the validity of the data collected and the analysis process utilized. All of the information collected in this study was in the form of in-depth interviews with participants. During the data collection procedures, the researcher asked participants to review their transcriptions, with the aim of verifying the data that the researcher obtained (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). Additionally, prior to step one of the data collection and analysis process, the researcher engaged in the epoche process, and document any presuppositions, judgments and beliefs about the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) notes that self-reflection contributes to the validation of a research study, and can lead to substantive validation and understanding the researcher’s own topic. Lastly, the researcher used corroborating evidence for the purposes of triangulation. Researchers can further validate their studies by utilizing evidence from various sources, “in order to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).
Potential Research Bias

The researcher’s interest in this topic stems from his role as a higher education academic advisor and academic coach at an online, international institution. In his role, the researcher works with domestic and international online students, providing guidance and support, helping locate resources, and provide recommendations for proper study habits. How online institutions support, educate and engage in retention and persistence initiatives have been the subject of continued debate in US higher education policy circles. As questions of program and degree quality continue to rise, the changing perceptions of online, for-profit education makes the researcher interested in how his institution, and other institutions, are responding to improving retention and persistence of enrolled student populations. The researcher was aware of the steps taken, and the results of those steps, at his institution. As such, the researcher is aware of the potential bias that his vantage point offers on his research topic.

Greene (2014) mentioned that insider research, in which the researcher has pre-existing knowledge of the subject being studied, can be beneficial when conducting research. However, there was also a danger that their bias on the subject can project their own views on participants and in the data analysis process (Greene, 2014). Recognizing and actively engaging in corrective measures can reduce potential bias in this research study. Techniques such as self-critique and reflexivity aided this researcher in gaining distance from this familiar topic and of the subjects being studied in order to create the most ethical, transferable and trustworthy study as possible (Greene, 2014).

Limitations

There are a few limitations to conducting interview-based phenomenological research. The first limitation is the lack of randomness in the study. Hycner (1985) noted that a common
limitation is the fact that participants need to have an understanding of the phenomenon being studied, and as such, the participants must be able to articulate their experience. This limitation also generates another, that of generalizability. Due to the lack of randomness, the themes and perceptions uncovered in the study can only be applied to the participants studied. These findings will only inform on these individuals, and not of the larger human population (Hycner, 1985). Another limitation is the accuracy of the descriptions, and the potential for confabulation and psychological defensiveness. Phenomenological studies interview participants who provide a retrospective viewpoint of the phenomenon being discussed. These retrospective experiences, according to Hycner (1985), “is altered by time and therefore different from the experience itself” (p. 295). These potential inaccurate accounts of experiences could be further affected by the participant trying to unconsciously filling in memory gaps with a subjective viewpoint (Hycner, 1985).

In addition to the limitations regarding the phenomenological approach, there are others that relate specifically to the topic being studied. The first limitation is that of language barriers. Since this research study interviewed students from non-English speaking countries, as well as English speaking countries, there may be misunderstandings and inconsistencies between the researcher’s analysis and the meaning of the statements made by the co-participants during the data analysis process. A second limitation is that this study does not take a student’s culture into context. Specifically, how a student’s cultural values and how that affects the use of student services is outside the scope of this research study. Lastly, this research study focused on a single aspect of a student’s experience with the institution and their degree program, which was a student’s experience with a specific student support service. As a result of this snapshot of a student’s experience, this study is limited to the interactions of the students with this service. All
others aspects of student experience (i.e. satisfaction levels with administrators or faculty members, use of technology, etc.) are outside of the scope of this research study.

Summary

This study explored the experiences of online, international student populations when they utilize virtual student support services, specifically their institution’s writing center. Transcendental phenomenology will be utilized as the methodology in order to address and understand the conscious experience of the participants. Participants’ experiences was shared via one-on-one, in-depth interviews. Data collection and analysis will follow the standards outlined by Moustakas (1994). Significant efforts will be made to reduce potential bias during the data analysis phase, including bracketing and phenomenological reduction. In review, transcendental phenomenology is used in this study to understand a participant’s conscious experience of the phenomenon (Smith, 2013) and explore how that phenomenon exists to the participant.
Chapter Four: Data Collection, Results and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to better understand online, international students’ lived experiences of online writing center services while they virtually attended their US institutions. Through the theoretical lenses of the transactional distance theory and the student involvement theory, interviews were conducted with the underlying research question: How do international, online, adult higher education students describe their lived experiences when using the virtual writing center services in their online international degree programs?

Eight international students, who came from New Zealand, Canada, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ireland, Zimbabwe, and Italy, were interviewed and asked to describe their experiences of US online, international education and their use of their institution’s writing center services. Each interview was led, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher using the phenomenological method.

Each participant’s experience of their institution’s writing center and their perceptions of its value were distinctive to that participant, however, five themes were clear in the responses. The five themes were: (a) perceptions and insights of an online degree, (b) skills and competencies gained through writing center use, (c) resources used in writing centers, (d) perceptions of the writing center, and (e) recommendations to improve online writing centers.

The first theme, *perceptions and insights of an online degree*, combined how the participants perceived their pursuit of a degree in the US. Within the first theme, the sub-themes that emerged were student perceptions and employer perceptions. The second theme, *skills and competencies gained through writing center use*, related to the participants’ experiences of what they learned through their interactions with the writing center and how they have perceived their value and use of that information in their professional careers. Within the second theme, a few
sub-themes emerged, including communications skills, confidence and value of interactions. The third theme, *resources used in writing centers*, describes what services the participants used during their degree programs. The fourth theme, *perceptions of the writing center*, relates to how the participants viewed the services and interactions when using writing center services, including how they perceived the feedback they were given by writing center staff members. Within the fourth theme, several sub-themes emerged, including scheduling feedback sessions, quality and encouragement, language obstacles, accessing services, and absence of the writing center. The fifth theme, *recommendations to improve online writing centers*, expresses the suggestions the participants had to improve the writing center’s services and resources.

This chapter will display quotations from the transcripts to illustrate the respective themes that emerged during the data analysis. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, a pseudonym was assigned to each participant. All additional information that identified the personal information of the participant was deleted from the quotations.

**International Student Perceptions of an Online Degree**

The first theme, *perceptions of an online degree*, combined how the participants perceived their pursuit of a degree in the US, as well as their perceptions of how their employers viewed their pursuit of a degree in the US. Student perceptions and employer perceptions are the two sub-themes within this first theme. Student motivations, perceptions, and value of a US degree varied from each other, but also in some cases, from the perceptions of their employers. This theme emerged in the research because all of the participants had reasons for choosing to attend a US-based institution, and more specifically, an online degree in a foreign country.
**Student Perceptions**

Participants described their perceptions of online international degree programs. George talked about the opportunity that online education provides. He explained that he had looked at local, traditional institutions before committing to his online degree, and said, “I thought that they are a couple of steps behind the education quality that you receive in the United States.”

Gino shared her motivations and decision to attend a program in the US, stating, “The first [motivation] was earning an American degree… In many [excluded] countries, USA degree is considered the best when applying for different jobs.”

Instead of discussing why he specifically choose the US for a degree program, Jack highlighted the difficulty in attending a program face-to-face, given his personal situation, and stated, “I knew it was going to be difficult for me to stop work and go full time, and go to a regular university.”

A couple of the participants specifically highlighted why they chose to attend a US institution, and mentioned their perceptions of a US education. While several participants discussed that they chose US universities because they had the program they were looking for, Steve discussed a very specific reason for his motivations. During the interview with Steve, he discussed that a change in his organization’s leadership resulted in a new Chief Executive Officer, who was an American. In discussing his new CEO, and his motivations, Steve described that:

His [CEO’s] leadership style, the way he approaches things, the way he does things, the way he creates an environment of work, is actually very inclusive, and I actually admire he is doing things, and thinking who is this guy, where does he come from, and I realized that he comes from the States. So, basically, I said I
must learn in America, and I definitely will be able to change the environment around me if I can do so. But that is the first motivator I had to learn in America.

Steve went onto mention his perceptions of the quality of education that he would receive in the U.S.:

I believe that America has high standards of learning… I feel that America is strict in terms of accreditation. Of course, there are bogus colleges and universities, but when it comes to colleges in America, most of them are accredited and the accreditation is transparent, and the certificates you get there are recognized globally.

During an interview with Audace, she also mentioned the value an international degree could have on her career progression and success. She described that she was admitted to a local institution in Rwanda, but preferred to have an international degree, citing that:

…an international degree is better than a local university. In addition to that, I was also looking the skills that I could get from this program, so I was getting more of a technology and communications on an international scale, as well as attending something which is different from what usually happens in our country, so I can open my mind to different opportunities and different paths that can arrive from my working life, and then find ways to adapt myself to those different real life situations.

**Employer Perceptions**

The second of the sub-themes relates to employer perceptions when their employees pursue a degree in the US. In addition to the participants sharing their perceptions of pursuing online degree programs in the US, they also shared how their employers have viewed their
pursuit of a degree. Because of the varying responses, it was important to create a sub-theme here, as it demonstrates the level of support that these participants have in their daily lives. Adam explained:

My employers, I think, they see that as a very interesting topic, to continue my education, and pursue my doctorate degree... This is something that nobody has done in my organization… They believe that once I have this project done, the value to the organization and our customers will be significantly great.

Self-improvement through additional degrees and certificates can improve the level of work that one produces in their occupations, and can be value to one’s future. Steve described his employer’s reactions about his decision to pursue additional degrees:

[My employer] actually values it [a US degree] so much that he actually working against me instead of supporting me. His value for the degree is working against me, unfortunately. He feels threatened by me because I report to him, so, me getting an American qualification, to him is like a threat, so he is not supporting me.

Online and distance education programs have been available for many years, but how they are perceived by students, different industries, and within different countries, is a primary reason for why the researcher asked participants to share their motivations and perceptions during the interview process. All of the participants mentioned they had discussed their intentions to attend an online university with their superiors and employers, prior to their enrollment in their international programs. The researcher specifically asked the participants about their motivations for pursuing US degrees, and many stated that their perceptions of a US-
based education provided them greater prospects for career success and what they could learn with a degree in a different country.

**Skills and Competencies and Writing Center Use**

The second theme, *skills and competencies gained through writing center use*, relates to the participants’ experiences of what they learned through their interactions with the writing center and how they have perceived the value and use of that information in their professional careers. The researcher asked participants to describe their learned skills from their various online institutions. While their experiences were different, participants mentioned improved communication skills, confidence and value of feedback in their improvement of the skills that they learned during their experience, which are included here as sub-themes.

**Communication Skills**

Participants noted communication skills as one of the learned skills they acquired through their use of the writing center services. Communications skills include both written and verbal skills that were gained through interactions with writing center tutors and staff. During one of the interviews with Audace, she discussed how she uses her skills, stating that:

> I am applying those communication skills in terms of writing and public speaking. I definitely used the writing services center only twice… I am not sure that I can say that what I am doing now is because of the service center, but of course it has a real contribution…

Steve explained how his writing was improved by being exposed to writing advisors.

> I also learned from the writing center that when I am writing I am not supposed to use a lot of jargon. I must be as clear as possible. I must actually avoid someone asking questions from what I have written.
Similarly, Gino explained specifically that he was able to directly connect his writing center experiences with his professional career.

I have used the information I got from writing center when making reports and creating materials to be used for different purposes. I was working as Teaching Assistant, and at the end I need to make reflection about my working experience. I have applied the skills I learnt from writing center to complete that reflection. As Teaching Assistant, I was also in need of those skill to prepare materials for students and make sure that there are no grammatical errors and no other problems that can prevent students from understanding the materials.

Jack described improvements in his written and verbal communications skills that directly contributed to their occupations.

One of the things I used the writing center for was to learn how to organize my research. You have the research center itself, but you have the writing center that shows you have to use the templates, and all that stuff – styling and all of that. I have used the writing center to learn how to organize the research and, uh, that’s helped me a lot. I also used them to learn the difference between synthesis and summarizing. And I actually refer to that quite often, just to make sure I am on track with my writing.

As part of the overall learned skills theme, communication skills as a sub-theme, reflect the importance of what the participants have learned and improved upon as they developed in their post-secondary degree programs. During the interview process, the participants described various levels of knowledge regarding writing in English, writing academic papers, and writing using APA citations. The communication skills addressed in this theme demonstrate the extent to
which the participant’s writing changed as a result of their use of the writing center’s resources, and links with the other sub-themes in learned skills, not least of which is the improvements in the participant’s confidence when writing in English.

**Increased Confidence**

During the interviews it became clear that hard skills, such as written and verbal skills, were not the only skills that were gained by the participants. Angie mentioned that her interactions with the writing center improved her confidence, stating:

> Well, I’ve learned many things. First, I learned how to… write in the American style, how to write in the APA style, and then, they also taught me about the American culture, like, how to structure a sentence in the way that Americans do, which I found it very beneficial for my assignments, and even my work. So, yeah, and then they gave me confidence in general about writing.

During an interview with Steve, he explained that many people in his community looked poorly upon online degree programs. Despite those attitudes in his surrounding community, Steve described how his interactions with the writing center aided his encouragement and persistence in the program, stating, “The writing center encouraged me to continue with my studies because I started with an objective, and I must not be a loser.” Jack described a similar circumstance during his interview:

> It [feedback] actually encouraged me… most of the feedback was more like a validation… so, it was useful and encouraging… In some cases I had to make changes, but that was ok, uh, because when you are looking for feedback you want to know what you have done wrong, what you have done right and what you need to change and all that, and I got that, so it was helpful, it was encouraging.
So, I thought that overall it was a positive experience that helped me. Sometimes you need that little motivation to move ahead.

**Value**

Value is another sub-theme that emerged from the data collection. The English language remains a medium that many companies and organizations use throughout the world in which to communicate. A couple of the participants shared their interactions directly contributed to their ability to improve their professional skills. Angie explained, “Writing in English is a common thing [in my profession], so I found it beneficial in a way that I can now write my articles in the American style.”

Steve had similar feedback, citing that in his professional work, “I have gotten a lot of feedback from my bosses, my peers, and my subordinates because of pursuing the degree and feedback. I am writing concise, clear thoughts, and no one asks me anything.” When Steve mentions, “no one asks me anything,” he is referring to his colleagues. During the interview Steve explained that his profession requires a significant amount of interaction with various stakeholders, and the ability to write in a way that can effectively communicate with all stakeholders can improve productivity when there are fewer individuals confused about the information shared in reports and publications.

Through the data analysis, participants describe that more than just writing skills are gained by using online writing services. This second theme emerged from the questions asked in during the interview process, and directly addresses the research question asked in this study. The participants’ knowledge and skills gained during their interactions with the writing center directly correlates with their experiences when utilizing online writing center services.
Writing Center Resources

The third theme, resources used in writing centers, describes what services the participants used during their degree programs. Questions about the resources utilized by participants were asked by the researcher to determine what features were utilized that supported students during their online degree programs. This line of questioning was asked to address one of the two frameworks of this research study – transactional distance theory. It three elements, of which the structure of a service or program contributes to the overall design of learning environment. The amount of structure, in this case, resources, helps determine the level of interaction with the other elements of TDT, learner autonomy and teacher distance. As a result of the questions participants indicated similarities in the resources they used during their degree programs. A common resource used among several of the participants was Grammarly, a tool which allows students to submit their papers, which automatically detects spelling, grammar and writing style mistakes. Adam specifically described her experiences with resources, including Grammarly, stating:

I used the webinars, I used Grammarly, I used, um, the blogs, the webcasts, this kind of channels or episodes to learn more about the writing skills, how to put together complete paragraphs and how to avoid any common mistakes and common problems when you just write something to write something academic, like scholarly voice.

The Grammarly tool only provides automated support. While that can be helpful for some students, additional interactions between student and writing tutor, were also employed by participants of this study. Steve specifically mentions that he utilized many services, “I have used
papers reviews, I have used Grammarly, and I have… attended the webinars and also watched archived webinars.”

During the interviews with Jack, he also mentioned the use of webinars and workshops, and specifically mentioned the APA citation services:

I have used the writing center in a number of different ways. I have attended the webinars – the APA webinar, attending the proposal writing workshop. I think it was the literature review workshop. I’ve attended that and I’ve used a lot of the tools that they have online such as the tools on synthesis and summarizing. Maybe I shouldn’t call them tools, but the articles they have and the guides that they have online. I have used them quite a bit.

Similarly, George describes the use of APA citation tools throughout his degree program, stating:

The only few occasions that I had use the writing center material, which I had already studied them in the orientation course at the beginning of my studies, but sometimes you need to review the materials, what’s the correct in-text citation. As you know we use APA in our referencing and you know, writing our papers, and it could be fairly complicated at the beginning, so I had to review the material every now and again, and ask questions from mentors or instructors, you know, on the writing center participants.

The third theme illustrates the resources utilized by the participants during their experiences with their writing centers. As online international students, they utilized these services as a way to improve their knowledge and skills when communicating in English.
International Student Perceptions of the Writing Center

The fourth theme, perceptions of the writing center, relates to how the participants viewed the services and interactions when using writing center services, including how they perceived the feedback they were given by writing center staff members. Questions about the participant’s perceptions of the writing center were asked to directly address the research question of this study. Some participants used only non-interactive resources, such as tutorials and how-to articles, while others had interacted with writing center staff members through paper reviews and feedback sessions. This theme includes several sub-themes, including scheduling tutoring sessions, quality of feedback, language obstacles, accessing services, and participants’ thoughts if the writing center did not exist at their institution.

Scheduling Sessions

Similar to traditional institutions, online writing center services require that students schedule appointments in advance, so that the tutor has time to review documents or prepare for questions on a writing topic. Each institution has a unique writing center environment, but even with this variation, similar perceptions emerge among the participants. During an interview with Angie, she described how she chose one of the writing center resources because of the amount of time it would take to get feedback:

Well the service offered, basically two options. The first is the interactive chat and the other one was, uh, a service where you can submit your assignments and they offer several services, like reviewing, offer suggestions regarding the content, and stuff like this…And then, actually, because they took me a while to, uh, like to be in line to get to talk to them, so I preferred submitting the assignment to them instead of waiting for their reply.
Steve described a similar circumstance, as he mentioned that:

When you [schedule an] appointment, you have to choose the dates you have to choose, so you might find that they are booked because… when they actually advise and ask assistance from the writing center, you have to request a single person, so that person actually knows you... So by waiting for that person, you find that that person is overbooked, for particular set of time that you need help.

During an interview with Audace, she also mentioned that she had schedule appointments with her institution’s writing center. While these sessions were helpful, she described the brevity of her direct interaction, “They were short, they were short feedback sessions.” Participants noted that scheduling interaction sessions can be challenging, given the distance between them and their institution’s writing center staff. Even though the participants mentioned challenges, they also mentioned that their experiences were beneficial to their success.

**Quality and Encouragement of Feedback**

The sub-theme of quality and encouragement of the feedback emerged as there was a common statement among participants, even as they attended different institutions. Statements and words, such as, “encouraging,” “useful,” and “helpful” were shared among the participants when asking this line of questioning. During an interview with Jack he mentioned the feedback he received was beneficial, stating:

It [information from writing center tutors] was useful and encouraging. Although not all of the feedback was… affirming. In some cases I had to make changes, but that was ok because when you are looking for feedback you want to know what you have done wrong, what you have done right and what you need to change and all that, and I got that, so it was helpful, it was encouraging. So, I thought that
overall it was a positive experience that helped me. Sometimes you need that little motivation to move ahead.

Steve explained that his use of the writing center was a very important aspect of his overall experience with his online institution, one he described as pivotal to his success:

The feedback was… direct and painful. It was really painful, and very critical and correct. That’s what I would say. I learned to take it as a gift, but no, this is someone that wants me to succeed. This person is helping me, so painful. Initially it was very painful. I would not send my paper back in, these people are very rough, but I said no, no, no, this is the way to go.

Adam described a similar feeling with the use of the writing center:

Well… it’s very encouraging actually, to keep using the writing center. I have no idea about the writing skills… I mean the academic writing skills, and they do have good knowledge, and they do have a lot of information to share with us [students].

Gino described that her institution’s writing center was encouraging as well, and took the time to further support and guide her, given her unique situation:

They encouraged me to continue in my degree program. As I was using English as my second language, I could easily make mistakes such that after getting feedback… The writing center’s services, resources and staff members were not ignorant of the fact that I was not a native English speaker. They tried to make the feedback as simple as possible for me to understand it and make use of it.
The sub-theme of quality of feedback helped explore the research question being asked in this research study. Perceptions and continued utilization of a student support service is impacted by the level of feedback that is being received by students.

**Language Obstacles**

Some of the participants noted challenges related to their command of the English language. Audace specifically mentioned a situation in which the writing center tutor did not account for a student’s potential struggles with English:

Sometimes the reviewers were using something technical or some vocabularies that were new to me, and then within the session of receiving feedback it was also hard for me to understand the meaning of the feedback because it was giving me this extra work, and I need to research what this words means so that I could understand what this feedback means. Also the different vocabularies, the different interpretations of different things, it was also a challenge for an online international student to understand, quickly, the feedback.

During an interview with Steve he acknowledged that while he was familiar with English, there are other challenges for online international students. He stated:

The only challenge that I had that I was initially was when I was communicating with them was, especially on the webinars. It was actually the American accent, the American accent was difficult for me, it was a challenge, and I just have to mention this one. There are colleagues, especially in [excluded country] that have difficulty with the American accent. Most actually avoid communicating or seeking help because of the American accent. It is a little bit difficult, especially when you are starting.
Language obstacles emerged as a sub-theme as participants noted that in their interactions with the writing center not all communication was written, and they needed additional clarification on their writing examples. These challenges may be impacting student success for online international students.

**Accessing Services**

Another sub-theme emerged within the theme of perceptions that relates to the accessibility of online student support services. As distance education students, the participants could not physically visit the writing center, and could only access the resources virtually. This sub-theme emerged as a result of direct questioning about the accessibility of the services within the participant’s various writing centers. George explained:

> There is a nice layout and very well organized materials that you can go to each step, and see the index and see the resources that are available to you, with the links and everything. If you really want to get your answer, it shouldn’t take you some 5-10 minutes for you to get yourself educated about the writing and what sort of quality is being expected of you from being a scholar level.

During the interviews with Adam informed me that his career is in the information technology field, and described how he did not have too many challenges accessing services, but that others may find challenges, stating:

> Well, it is very well organized, actually… It might be time consuming for technology-challenged people, but for me, because I work in IT, getting information from the portal, the web, its fine. Some people raised that topic, raised that concern, they say time consuming, and sometimes challenging to retrieve that document or presentation from the writing center.
Jack, briefly described his experience with accessing resources and services:

It [resources] was very very searchable.

The ease, or difficulty, in accessing online resources can contribute to the overall perception of that student service or of the university as a whole for online students. Because of the importance of accessibility, the researcher developed this sub-theme.

**Absence of Writing Center Services**

The final sub-theme, within the perceptions of the writing center theme, was developed to understand the impact that the writing center had on the participants. The sub-theme emerged as a result of direct questioning about what the participants would do for writing support, if the writing center did not exist at their institution. Buddy described the importance of the writing center to him, stating:

…without it [writing center], I don’t think I would have progressed!

Having a similar perspective, George mentioned that:

If you didn’t have the writing center, it would be quite a bit of nightmare.

Adam also shared that the writing center was critical for his success, stating that it would be a nightmare if it didn’t exist. He further mentioned that:

The writing center is crucial… very important, and there is no one, in my humble opinion, no one, whatever, international student or American students… no one can proceed without the writing center.

During an interview with Jack, he freely explained the importance the writing center had on his experience as an online international student, stating:

I think the writing center is an absolutely essential service, uh, for international students. And I say that because you need a place to find resources. Without
having such a service, in addition, to the library and other useful services, I don’t think the experience would be complete.

The fourth theme emerged as a result of direct questioning about the participants’ perceptions of the writing center as they utilized it during their online degree programs. This theme highlights both the positive and negative experiences the participants had during their use of their writing centers. As a result of the questioning, the sub-themes of accessing services, quality of the feedback, language obstacles, and absence of the writing center were also developed.

**International Student Recommendations to Improve Writing Centers**

The fifth theme, *recommendations to improve writing centers*, expresses the suggestions the participants had to improve their writing center’s services and resources. These recommendations include additional technology-related improvements to the structure of online writing center services, as well as how the interactions between writing tutor and student can be improved. Adam specifically addresses the use of a mobile application, and how the writing center could be improved through different technologies, explaining:

I’d like to have enough mobile application… It could be desktop or could be on the phone, it could be an application that will help me to carry out my favorite list… The other one could be very beneficial to the students is some kind of interactive sessions with the instructors, or uh, the writing center, I would say something like WebX or something like shared desktop, to have, let’s say, 15 or 30 minute sessions with one of the experts to show them what you are doing and have a video chat with them… That will make a big difference, and people will see that it is very easy for them to learn such concepts, and such, new skills.
While Adam mentioned that he worked in the IT field, and disclosed IT-related feedback related to the website, other participants noted that improvements about the tutor experience itself. During Angie’s interview, she noted that some improvements could be made to address language issues:

The only thing that I would say that would be nice if it would be a specific feature of international students would be like to address specific needs about language or what they may have thought. I mean, they didn’t… they did everything ok, it was just something more dedicated for international students, but something additional.

This research study required that participants utilized their institution’s writing center services. However, institutions vary in the types of support they offer within their writing centers. Gino described that in his institution, writing tutors could help further clarify information contained in articles and webinar tutorials, stating:

They need to have a virtual person who can speak to someone in need of support because articles and tutorials may not be enough especially for those who are using English or any other language as their second language not native one. This would allow the student to ask questions and get the help directly.

During an interview with Audace, she highlighted another aspect of instructor feedback that is sometimes a limitation for online students – face-to-face interactions. In her institution, writing center services provided support over the phone, but did not contain video/visual support within the writing center:

I think it would be better if the writing center was providing… online interactions, where you can interact with the coach or reviewer face-to-face. I do not think only
chatting with them on the document, or not only quoting them, but these, how do I call it, be able to see you and be able to see me… because with the struggles of new English accent, it would be easier if I could also see that the reviewer or coach is using for me to be able to associate with the message, and then I am clear on what the reviewer is talking about.

During an interview with Steve, he mentioned another aspect of the writing center that could specifically help online international students. While online dictionaries exist, having one within his writing center would have been helpful for him. Steve stated that, “… I would have loved for it [writing center] to have a dictionary in this platform… in their page.”

The fifth theme addresses recommendations and suggestions the participants had for their writing center services. As online education becomes more of a staple in many higher education institutions, understanding student’s needs can help institutions further support students along their educational paths.

**Summary**

This research study explores the experiences of online, international student populations when they utilize virtual student support services, specifically their institution’s writing center. In this chapter, the researcher outlined the results that were obtained in this study. After an analysis of the data collected through the transcendental phenomenological methodology, five themes emerged: (a) perceptions of an online US degree, (b) learned skills, (c) resources, (d) perceptions of the writing center, and (e) recommendations. In the above analysis, the participants discussed positive and negative aspects of their online writing center services experiences.
Results from this study suggest that while there are many positives to online writing center services, there are also aspects of online student support services that can be improved for international student populations. While online higher education options are accessible to all students who have internet access, the level at which these student services support all of the students at an institution, such as traditional, non-traditional, domestic online, and international online, can impact the receptivity of that institution or degree program throughout the world. The final chapter will further discuss the themes presented here, and discuss future recommendations to higher education institutions and their stakeholders.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to better understand online, international students’ lived experiences of online writing center services in their online US institutions. Eight international students, who came from New Zealand, Canada, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ireland, Zimbabwe, and Italy respectively, were interviewed and asked to describe their experiences of US online, international education and their use of their institution’s writing center services. Each interview was led, transcribed, and analyzed by the researcher using the phenomenological method. The result of the study determined five themes: (a) perceptions and insights of an online degree, (b) skills and competencies gained through writing center use, (c) resources used in writing centers, (d) perceptions of the writing center, and (e) recommendations to improve writing centers.

This chapter examines and discusses the results obtained in this study, and is separated into four sections. The first section will integrate literature that was previously examined with the themes and sub-themes that were determined by the study. The second section will address the differences and similarities that existed among the participants. The third section will discuss reflections on the use of the methodology and the implications for the higher education practice. The fourth section will look at contributions to the practice and suggestions for future research.

The Phenomenon and the Literature

In this section, the results obtained through this study will be examined alongside the existing literature. Specifically, perceptions and insights of an online degree, skills and competencies gained through writing center use, resources used in writing centers, perceptions of the writing center, and recommendations to improve writing centers are discussed, addressing how they corroborate or contest the existing literature.
International Student Perceptions of Online degrees

Previous literature explored the vast array of reactions by scholars and employers regarding the acceptability of the online, international degrees. However, the current study reveals stark differences from the reactions of previous studies collected on the view of online international degrees (Zhang et al, 2012; Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011; Sadik, 2013). Participants noted that their employers welcomed, and often encouraged, them to pursue a degree in the US. Rather, the participant’s reactions more closely align with the sentiments of other researchers (Ho et al., 2015; Wysokinska, 2009; Picciano, 2006; Lukman & Krajnc, 2012; Mundkur & Ellickson, 2012; Coffey et al., 2013), confirming that a US degree, instruction in the English language, and learning how the developed world has approached certain business practices, can significantly improve the knowledge, information, and local practices in many industries. Picciano (2006) study reported that in Africa a strong desire for better technology, more education and more fluency in the English language for their citizens draws enrollments from this continent. This study interviewed participants living and working in African countries, and their responses directly coincide with these findings.

Participants also echoed the findings of Mundkur and Ellickson (2012), and addressed that interacting with others outside of their nations challenged their views, and added to their ability to contribute to their own companies and industries. As such, the findings of the current study also directly refuted the findings of Walker (2009) and Amthor and Metzger (2011), when discussing the impact of a Western-hemisphere curriculum in the participant’s nations. Walker (2009) noted that western curriculum is sometimes viewed as academic capitalism that strikes the tone of growing and creating profit, in lieu of enhancing learning.
Amthor and Metager (2011) reported, “students will be educated in dominant neoliberal contexts, internalize the dominant discourses, maximize individual gain at the expense of civic engagement, and in turn participate (willingly or unwittingly) in reproducing the structure” (p. 74). Not all participants mentioned the mission of their institution in relation to the underlying themes of their institution’s courses and programs. However, in the case of one participant, the desire to improve his life, and the lives of others in his nation, was a direct result of his institution’s mission of helping improve social change, a theme that resonated throughout that institution’s programming. This participant noted this as one of the primary reasons for selecting that institution for his online degree.

**Skills and Competencies Gained through Writing Center Use**

The second theme examines the learned skills that were gained by the participants in this study after they had used the writing center services. As the previous literature noted, adult students sometimes lack important skills that can help them from being successful in distance education programs, especially in students who do not have a strong command of these skills (Bakare, 2012). Through the use of student services, many adult students can acquire these valuable skills, and learn how to employ them in their professional careers. Participants noted that many skills were gained through their interactions with the writing center, such as confidence using the English language, improved communication skills and a better understanding of writing and utilizing research.

Participants described learning these skills through tutorials and resources, as well as through chats and discussions with writing center staff members. This finding confirmed the findings of Kabilan, Ahmad, and Abidin (2010), in that students were able to build confidence, learn new words, and have more positive experiences when learning the English language.
through chats and discussions. Several researchers have concluded that the value of learning the English language, as an international student studying “in” the US, cannot be overstated (Berchem, 1991; Coffey, et. al., 2013; Picciano, 2006). Participants in this current study also mentioned the value they gained as they learned more about the English language.

Their improvements in creating presentations, writing reports, and having a more successful time writing in the “American” style, has helped improve them, and those that they interact with in their nations. Berchem (1991) described that as professionals and global citizens, graduates working in a cross-cultural context where they will, “need to have more knowledge not only of the social, cultural and economic realities, but also of the languages of partner countries” (p. 298). In order to improve and develop their skills, participants used several different resources within their writing centers.

**Writing Center Resources**

Current literature on higher education student services illustrate the significant amount of information that stakeholders have regarding the importance of student support services for all higher education students (Wyatt, 2011; Cheung et al., 2010; Al-Khasawneh & Obeidallah, 2015; Abrami et al., 2011). Resources and services targeted to online student support services can help students achieve their goals of graduating from their degree programs. Knowledge gained by students through interactions with resources can help them to achieve their goals. Schumann et al. (2008) described a three-tiered knowledge transfer structure in e-learning environments, which includes the web-based training systems, followed by the network of faculty/training specialists, and ends with the user-support networks, which includes personal services for students. Personal services, as defined by Schumann et al. (2008), include coaching and tutoring systems that when linked to the rest of the multi-level knowledge transfer system,
can facilitate effective knowledge transfer while using e-learning educational models.

Participants in this current study sought out the resources from the writing center, and many utilized both writing specialists/faculty and support networks, all of them being web-based services they accessed through their digital institutional portals. Differences emerged across institutions with regards to the types of services offered, such as formal services and informal ones. Amador and Amador (2014) conducted a study with student using Facebook for writing support, and determined that while students like it, students preferred using other resources for English language guidance. Manca and Ranieri (2013) further noted that even among digital natives, such as millennial learners, there is an discomfortability using informal learning tools such as Facebook for writing support.

The current study determined that the formal mechanisms for writing support, such as Grammarly and step-by-step tutorials, were preferred methods, rather than using other informal structures. This current study discovered that students utilized asynchronous resources as often as synchronous ones, illustrating the broad usage of writing support services utilized by the participants. As the previous literature notes, issues with reliable internet connectivity in certain countries can impact certain aspects of student support services, mainly synchronous formats (Cangie & Cahill, 2016). Cangie and Cahill (2016) also noted that video-based learning, and other asynchronous formats, should not be considered a panacea, but can also be helpful for the student’s success.

**International Student Perceptions of the Writing Center**

Previous literature on the use of course-based learning support and unique services, such as the writing center, career services, and the bookstore, found that many students perceived course-level support (faculty members, tutoring, and library services) as important, while fewer
students indicated that resources needed for the unique services were important (Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, & Zhou, 2015). Many of the participants in this current study explained the necessity of the writing center for their success, persistence and program completion. One participant even noted their opinion that no one would have been able to proceed without these services. Milman et al. (2015) recommended that institutions consider writing coaches be assigned to specific coaches, instead of having a single writing center. Contradicting that study, all of the participants in this study indicated that the one-stop-shop approach, where they could locate all of their writing support needs, was a great benefit to their success. Participants in this study aligned with Ball (2014), and articulated that their time spent using the writing center improved their engagement and the persistence of their studies. Although Ball (2014) researched traditional student populations, the results of this study demonstrated that there is a positive impact on student success when students utilize specific support centers, regardless of students’ traditional or non-traditional statuses.

In a study conducted on international students’ use of support services, Lee (2013) indicated that many do not seek out this support because they are unaware of their existence (Lee, 2013). In this current study, all of participants noted that there was ample communication about writing center services, good information about where locate the center on their digital portals, and how to utilize these resources as they moved through their degree programs.

Participants in this current study worked directly with writing tutors, as well as guides and other tutorial-based resources. In a study conducted on the perceptions of online tutors, researchers determined that students rated online tutoring poorer than face-to-face tutoring options (Price et al., 2007). Additionally, Price et al. (2007) suggested that in cases of tutoring in courses with a multidisciplinary focus, the tutor may not have the expertise in all of those
disciplines, limiting their ability to properly support students, and are being perceived as less competent. While the participants in this study did not have the option for face-to-face tutoring sessions, all of the participants who had appointments with the writing center tutors noted that their experiences were very beneficial to their success, and found the tutors able to address all of their questions.

Previous studies researched student perceptions as it relates to satisfaction and persistence in degree programs. Park and Choi (2009) reported that online learners are less likely to drop out when they were satisfied with courses, as well as when the content of those courses were related to their personal and professional lives. Upholding these findings, the majority of the participants in this study were very satisfied by the encouragement and support they received from their writing centers, improving their satisfaction levels. However, it is interesting to note that while the writing center was encouraging for many of the participants, at least one person had indicated that one of the barriers to the use of tutoring services stemmed from the issues with understanding the American accent. When discussing this issue one of the participants discussed that amongst his peers, who were pursuing degrees in the US, there was a tendency to avoid communicating or seeking help because of the difficulty in understanding an American accent. The participant further mentioned that this issue is of a particular concern when international students are just starting their degree programs.

International Student Recommendations to Improve Writing Centers

The final theme determined through the analysis of the data in this current study is suggestions and recommendations that the participants had about their writing center experience. Several of the participants indicated that their experience was greatly improved by the use and interactions with the writing center resources and staff members. Melkun (2012) indicated that
non-traditional students are often unfamiliar with academic writing techniques, and online writing groups could help them gain familiarity with writing styles. While the participants did not specifically mention suggestions about creating writing groups to improve their knowledge of academic writing, some had suggested that there should be more interactive opportunities utilizing mobile applications. A few of the participants had suggested the use of video sessions, instead of just audio sessions, helping them to see and interact better with their writing tutor. They referenced video sessions in conjunction with their struggles with the American accent, saying that by seeing the tutor face to face, they would be more easily able to associate the feedback they were getting, and better understand what they need to do to improve their writing.

Recognizing the need to create more of these e-learning platforms, both in web-form and mobile-form, institutions throughout the world continue to expand their virtual student support services. Al-Khasawneh and Obeidellah (2015) noted that one university, Hashemite University in the Kingdom of Jordan, has begun to employ Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in order to develop e-learning technology and support practices to support their operations and students. Abrami et al. (2011) argued that future generations of online learning environments need to facilitate more purposeful interactions, and mentioned specifically that “guided, focused and purposeful interaction goes beyond whether opportunities for interaction exist to consider especially why and how interaction occurs” (p. 98). Lazerson (2010) noted that, “information technology has changed libraries, redefined research, made borderless education possible” (p.108). The continued development of ICT within institutions helps make that institution more competitive on the world market, but once implemented, concerns continued to be raised about student success and retention. However, as one participant noted, e-learning
technology is not intuitive, and those that struggle with technology may experience anxiety and confusion over how to use student support resources.

Student satisfaction can be tied to levels of anxiety, and could impact retention and persistence in programs (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012). Bolliger and Halupa (2012) recommended that online instructors create more purposeful approaches and planned interventions to decrease the anxiety levels of online students. When students have positive online learning experiences, evidence suggests that retention and success rates improve and barriers to learning decrease (Hachey, Wladis, & Conway, 2012). At least one of the participants in this current study indicated that they felt there should be a more effective introduction to the writing center services for international students as they are not as familiar with academic writing in the US. Other participants noted that more information specifically for international students could be beneficial to international student success, such as language resources.

This sentiment supports research conducted by Paltridge and Starfield (2007), as they note that there are several issues when students write in English as a second language, including psycho-affective/emotional issues, behavioral issues, social issues and rhetorical issues. One of the participants in this current study addressed the limitations of her writing center to address cultural colloquialisms that the writing tutors may have used without realizing it. Another participant referenced that the presence of a dictionary within the writing center could help international students easily access materials related to the feedback they were getting by tutors.

### Lived Experiences of Online International Students

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of online international students. Each participant interviewed through this methodology had a unique perspective when utilizing their institution’s writing center. However, while there were
differences, there were also several similarities in experiences among the participants that aided in the development of the main themes addressed above. This section explores the similarities and differences among the participants.

The majority of the participants were motivated to use the writing center services based on their need for support and guidance when writing their papers or assignments. Steve mentioned that his motivation for using the writing center was for verification, as his faculty member had provided information about academic writing that was inconsistent with the information he had learned previously about academic writing. Most of the participants mentioned that there is a focus in US institutions on avoiding plagiarism and correctly citing sources. As a result of this perspective, their use of the writing center focused mainly on APA citation resources and the use of Grammarly, TurnItIn, and other plagiarism avoidance tools. Buddy describes that:

Plagiarism resources… helped me understand how plagiarism worked, and it was a major challenge in my international schooling. Plagiarism is a very serious matter to Americans.

Most of the participants mentioned that they gained confidence in their writing and use of the English language through the utilization of the writing center services. George mentioned it is not easy learning about US writing practices, as there are new rules and standards from what he had been used to in his country. He further discussed that his writing proficiency was improved through his writing center interactions. Angie also mentioned that she gained confidence through her interactions.

In looking at similarities and differences among the participants, including motivations for pursuing a degree in the US, nationality, type of degree program, and type of institution
attended (i.e. brick and mortar that has an online degree program or a completely online university), the biggest difference related to nationality of the participant, and resources used within the writing center. Four of the participants live in three different nations in Africa, two live in Europe, and one lives in Canada. These differences contributed to the participant’s varying levels of English proficiency, leading them to use different writing center services.

**Reflections on Methodology**

The use of phenomenology to guide this study was very beneficial to the data that was obtained. I believe that because of the type of interview questions that are used for this type of research method, I was able to obtain in-depth understanding of the experiences of the participants as they used their online writing centers. This study utilized a three-interview approach, where the first interview provided context for the study and built rapport, and the second and third interviews were designed to gather data and provide verification of the significant statements that were discovered. As a result of this approach, and the rapport that was achieved, the participants felt comfortable with me asking them questions, and none of them experienced anxiety or uneasiness during the interview process.

This research design is not without limitations. Phenomenological studies rely on the subjective experiences of the participants. Additionally, in the case of this study, time has passed since the participant had used their writing center services. Hycner (1985) writes that retrospective experiences can be altered by time, creating potential inaccuracies. However, future studies can explore the experiences of these online, international populations, which could further explore the results obtained in this research study.
Implication for the Practice

The data collected from this study can offer several opportunities and considerations for the higher education practice.

For Writing Centers: Expansion of Services and Types of Support

One implication for the practice of higher education in global institutions is to train, educate or hire multilingual writing and language support in the form of tutors and instructors working with international students. Along with language training, encouraging or requiring tutors to have credentials or certifications can also help students learn to write in English. As beneficial as the writing center was for the participants in this study, the results indicate that in order to better understand the feedback that students are receiving from tutors, it will be beneficial for them to hear it in a language other than English. Additionally, results from this study indicate that additional knowledge and consideration of the student’s cultural background could be helpful for international students.

Sabatino and Rafoth (2012) reported that as educational opportunities spread throughout the world, “it is important to extend the benefits of writing centers to students everywhere and to do so with full understanding of the language and cultural needs to second language learners” (p. 83). With the growing focus on the internationalization of higher education, institutions, and their instructors, will need to be able to support these students as they seek out support resources. Much will depend on the cultural and budgetary context of the institution, however, multilingual tutors could be hired to support those departments. It will not be feasible to hire tutors who can speak and interact with all of the languages and cultural contexts of the world. However, there are common languages that are spoken in certain regions. In Nigeria, where a couple of the
participants live, French is a commonly spoken language. In the case of these participants, writing tutors who could communicate in French would be a great benefit to them.

Closely related to the last implication, another consideration for the writing center is the expansion of their services to include face-to-face tutoring sessions. The results from this study indicated that the American accent is difficult to understand for some students, and the opportunity to see the tutor can provide some additional context for the feedback that is being shared with the student. In addition to overcoming language barriers that may exist without this service, the expansion of the writing tutors' visibility with face-to-face sessions could help create connections between writing center staff members and the students they serve, helping students have a greater satisfaction with the institution by providing them a face, to go along with the name. Online higher education is inherently isolating for the student.

Brown et al. (2013) mentioned that one of the reasons online students remain at-risk is that there is an inherent disconnection between these students and institutional support resources. Any opportunity to shorten the distance between the resources and the student can go a long way to improving satisfaction, retention and persistence among all student populations, especially international online students. The creation of face-to-face meetings, in addition to shortening the transactional distance, can also help students who are a different levels of comfortability with writing in English. Students will have different skills upon entering their degree programs, and by being able to converse with tutors visually, may be better able to guide and develop the writing skills of those with more limited experience writing in English.

Another set of considerations is the expansion of the writing center onto mobile devices. Constant advances with regards to mobile technology, and the expansion of their use by students throughout the world, means that more students will be utilizing resources that can be accessed
by mobile devices. The results from this study, from at least one participant, indicate that resources that can be downloaded on to a phone or tablet means that they can access this information at any time, without or without an internet connection.

Technology is always evolving, and the type of mobile device used by a student population could also be an important consideration. Formatting differences between Apple-based products, Android-based products, tablets, and others, may impact the use and availability of resources for certain student populations, as certain formats (HTML, Javascript, etc.) may not be supported by certain products. As technology improves, the cost of these programs, services or upgrades to existing campus resources, may drop, due to competition among various vendors. Institutions should investigate how to leverage these competitive prices for technological upgrades to student support services. Additional information about what technology or platform students are using can be assessed through surveys.

Asking students to provide information through student surveys at the start of a student’s program, could allow all student support services to determine which formatting type will be most effective for their students. As a companion consideration, writing centers should explore the opportunity to provide tutor feedback sessions in more than one communication format. During the data collection phase of this research topic, the researcher learned that in different parts of the world, Skype and other common communication services used in US may not connect at a reliable enough pace for international students, and thus are not used. Other applications and services, such as WhatsApp, may use less data and do not require the strong internet connection that other applications do, and are more widely used by those students.

Another consideration is related to time zones and student support hours. The results of this study also indicated that students living and working overseas require greater flexibility in
the availability of certain types of support features. According to a few participants in this study, tutor feedback sessions are held within US-minded business hours, and thus may be early in the morning or late in the afternoon for their international student populations.

Online writing centers should include additional international-specific features and resources in an area that contains multiple handy links. International students indicated that while the features and services within the writing centers are beneficial, services related to international students that they could use independently could further aid their development through their academic and professional careers. Along with cultural assistance, one participant mentioned that it would be useful to have a link to a dictionary posted on the writing center’s website, that could help students better understand the language that the tutors use during their sessions. Links to a dictionary, and instructions on how to use the dictionary feature of Word, could help students develop better vocabulary skills. Along with the writing tutor’s feedback, tutors can help second language writers improve their writing through their interactions, saying that they can raise questions about a student’s word choice when it is unclear what the writer intends (Sabatino & Rafoth, 2012). Another participant mentioned that information about cultural colloquialisms would help international students understand the nuances of the English language. It is possible that the tutors may not be aware that they are using these colloquialisms, and thus may be inadvertently confusing international students.

Higher Education Institutional Enrollment Strategies

US higher education institutions continue to expand their marketing and recruitment strategies to include international students, both for traditional and non-traditional degree programs. Increased globalization of education, and the need to provide educational opportunities in a knowledge-based economy, means that institutions need to support, retain, and
are responsible for the development of all of their students, including their international students. Ali, Zhou, Hussain, Nair, and Ragavan (2016) noted that the competition in the higher education sector has resulted in a situation where students are now comparing their knowledge gained and what they expect from their support services. Furthermore, the results from study presented by Ali et al. (2016) indicated that “students with better perceptions of the various dimensions of higher education service quality (academic aspects, non-academic aspects, program issues, reputation and access) are more likely to have higher satisfaction levels resulting in better perceived institutional image and student loyalty” (p. 86). Many of the participants in this study indicated that a US higher education remains a highly reputable option for students seeking career and professional advancement, and provides recognized and accredited degree credentials.

Lee (2013) noted that when it comes to international student populations, many do not seek out the support of student services because they are unaware of their existence, and also because some of these services do not exist in their home nations. Institutions, looking to recruit and retain these populations, can better highlight services by providing support service group offerings described in different languages. While the primary language of the institution should always be considered, higher education institutions should consider updating websites and promotional materials to include information in the major languages they know that international students speak. By clearly articulating the support services that exist within that institution in multiple language offerings, it will help to ensure that students know what options are available to them if they were to attend.

Better institutional understanding of the needs of international student populations who attend US institutions, begin with an appreciation of multilingual student needs; some students may not have a strong command of the English language. By providing information in a way
that is understood by all student populations, the university demonstrates their commitment to diversity and the inclusion and development of all global citizens. Institutions can aid in the collaborative efforts amongst the various student service departments, as a further opportunity to improve the development and success of students. Mamiseishvili (2012) noted that the larger campus community (faculty, student affairs, etc.) needs to reinforce the success of students. This consideration can help institutions overcome language barriers and build confidence within their international student populations.

An additional consideration relates to department-level and institution-level leadership and development of online learning platforms within higher education institutions. Each participant in this study suggested some improvements for their institution’s writing center. With the increased use of online degree programs throughout US higher education institutions, administrators and leaders will need to address how these programs and services are supporting all student populations. The National Education Technology Plan released by the US Department of Education (2017) reported that “technology alone does not transform learning; rather, technology helps enable transformative learning” (p. 42). This vision begins with educational leaders. Systemic change within higher education institutions, that enable greater learning by all student populations, will begin with these transformational leaders creating the steps needed to improve online student support services.

Institutional and department-level leaders should explore the extent at which institutional missions are adequately supporting all student populations. On websites and in marketing material, most higher education institutions highlight the importance of a diverse student body work to develop students through their incorporation into a global community of scholars. However, at one British University, researchers determined that some international students are
unclear as to what the term global community means or saw their institution as being a global community (Jackson, Harris, & Crawford, 2015). A robust and rigorous assessment of services, programs, and initiatives aimed at student development and support should to be conducted by the leadership of these departments and institutions to ensure that institutional missions are being carried out by these departments and services. The research conducted by Jackson et al. (2015) further supported the findings that international student inclusion into learning communities, or other types of communities on campus, could enhance academic achievement and improve retention rates. The research conducted in this study demonstrated how a more effective and inclusive culture for online, international student populations can better support these students in their academic development and impart more of an understanding of how to become a global citizen.

**Implications for the Researcher**

Conducting this research study has been an eye-opening experience. Through the collection of data and the analysis of the results, the researcher has improved his knowledge of the subject matter, but also how to inform and recommend changes to his institution. Even though the research conducted in this study was not bound to a specific research site, improvement and additions can be made to his institution, in order to better serve international student populations.

Upon the complication of this research study, the researcher plans to work with directors of his institution’s writing center, and other internal stakeholders regarding the results obtained. Through presentations and discussions with current academic and administrative leadership, one of the implications will be to take on leadership roles in the changes or initiatives that result from those meetings. Acting as a change agent within the institution, and through collaborations with
internal stakeholders and student support services leadership, the researcher will be able to explore new pathways that could result in additional intervention points and services aimed at better supporting global citizens.

Additional implications for the researcher relate to external conferences and presentations outside of his institution. The researcher plans to present this data to professional associations throughout the higher education community, to better inform and guide student support practices related to this student population. The research conducted in this study demonstrate the vast differences that exist among various institutions and their student support services. Through presentations and conferences where stakeholders congregate, additional information can be learned about approaches taken by other institutions, and how they can use this research to better serve their institutions.

**Contributions and Future Research**

Because asynchronous adult educational settings are new environments, the study contributes to the body of knowledge that exists within higher education in a couple of ways. As an examination of international student perceptions of writing center services, it contributes to student support scholarship that can be used to enhance the offerings for this specific population. Few studies have been conducted on the types of resources used in writing centers to international populations attending programs completely online. Many of these studies explored only what resources have been accessed by completing online international students. The responses obtained in this study highlight the perceptions and lived experiences of these international students accessing online resources while living and working overseas and provided an overview the current support of the structures provided by some US higher education. As US higher education institutions expand their recruitment efforts into the global knowledge-
economy, the study helps provide possible recommendations and suggestions to US higher education institutions to consider to enhance persistence for this group.

**Future Research**

Due to the nature of qualitative research studies, as well as from the phenomenological methodology chosen, a broader survey of international students at multiple degree levels could further illuminate the relationship between support services and retention. Although this study did not specifically address or explore the differences in the nationalities of the participants, regionality could play a role in support service awareness and use. Furthermore, the sample size used in this study does not represent a global perspective of US online higher education options, nor does it provide programmatic support that might also impact student persistence. Future research studies could be conducted on the perspectives of US higher education, as well as the use of online writing center services by interviewing online international students on specific continents or in specific regions of the world (i.e. Asia, South America, and Europe).

Secondly, this study did not specifically address the differences in the perceptions of writing center services by gender. Comparing the experiences using gender as a lens, as it relates to individual perceptions of the services offered, as well as of the value they received from these services, would be of great importance for future research studies conducted on this subject. Demographic variables might reveal that gender impacts a student’s self-efficacy around writing support. Similarly, this study did not consider the differences in the ages of the participants or their comfort with technology. Future studies can be conducted on the experiences of using online resources and writing center tutors, comparing and contrasting the outcomes gained by students of various ages, and exploring whether technology competence impacts support service access.
Thirdly, this study did not isolate specific institutions and their writing centers, so there is variability in the nature of the staff-to-student ratios. Different institutions provide distinct cultures in their physical and/or virtual campuses, which could impact the availability of services presented to students. Suggestions for future studies include conducting studies on one specific institution, such as brick and mortar institutions with online learning environments, or completely online institutions, which could further be divided into non-profit and for-profit institutions.

Participants of this research study had attended several different types of degree programs, in different subject areas at different degree levels. Comparing and contrasting the experiences of online international students in specific subject areas is another suggestion for future research studies.

Lastly, future research studies could assess the impact of consultation with an online writing center and the educational outcomes of online, international students by interviewing their employers regarding written communication skills. This current study asked participants about how their employers responded to their decision to attend an online US degree program. Future studies might explore the perceptions of their employers regarding the development and application of the knowledge gained and writing/communications skills learned by their employees after accessing writing center services.

The directions for future research and the implications addressed in this study are steps designed to improve higher education student success in international, online student populations. As higher education institutions continue to explore the online modality, action will need to be taken that better supports and guides online students. Should institutions continue to explore and recruit international, online student populations, steps will need to be taken to
improve writing center services that support fluent English speakers and writers, as well as other learners whose language is not English.
Figure 1. A model of transactional distance (adopted from Saba, 2003) (as cited in Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008)
Appendix B
Initial Recruitment Letter
Northeastern University – College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Subject line: Doctoral dissertation needs participants

Hello (Student),

My name is Joshua Bass and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University, in Boston, Massachusetts, in the United States of America.

I am currently working on my dissertation, which is investigating the experiences of international, online, adult students when utilizing their institution’s writing center student services.

I noticed on LinkedIn that you attended (university) in the United States, and took your classes online.

Would you be interested in participating in my dissertation?

If you are interested in learning more about this study, please contact my using this email or my school email: Bass.jo@husky.neu.edu. Contacting me does not commit you to the research study. Participation in this study is voluntary, and if you decide to participate, you can stop at any time.

I hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,

Joshua Bass
Appendix C
Follow Up Recruitment Letter
Northeastern University – College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

** This email will be sent to students who did not respond to the initial email, and provide a chance for them to submit their contact information and questions.

Subject Line: Doctoral dissertation needs participants

Dear (Student),

A week ago you received an email about participating in a research study that I am doing for my doctoral dissertation.

This email is a reminder about that study. Please contact me if you are interested in participating or if you have any questions. I can be reached at bass.jo@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you again for your consideration. I look forward to speaking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Joshua Bass
Appendix D
Informed Consent Form
Northeastern University – College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Title of Project: A Study of Student Support in a Virtual Space: A Phenomenological Approach to Understanding International Student Success
Principal Investigator’s name: Dr. Ronald Brown
Student Researcher’s name: Joshua Bass, Northeastern University

Request to Participate in Research
We would like to invite you to take part in a research project. The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences students are having with online higher education writing center services and resources. The goal of the study is to add to the existing body of knowledge about institutional support for international and distance students.

You must be at least 18 years old to be in this research project. You are being asked to participate because you meet special characteristics. Specifically, you are being asked because you are an international, online, adult student who has utilized writing center services at your higher education institution. This study explores the experiences of students, such as yourself, in order to better understand how these services have impacted your educational experience.

The study will take place virtually and will take a total of 2-3 hours across 3 separate interviews. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be interviewed by me three separate times. Our first meeting will last about 30 minutes, in which we will discuss your background, go over the consent form, discuss ethical considerations, and give you the chance to ask questions about the research study. Our second meeting will be the longest, asking questions about your experiences utilizing your institution’s writing center services. This interview will be recording using the Skype recording feature, and transcribed following our meeting. I have included the questions that I will be asking below, to give you a chance to prepare for them in advance of our meeting. Following our second meeting, I will provide you the transcriptions from our interview along with a summary of your experiences, giving you the chance to address inaccuracies, clarify any information obtained, and/or address my interpretations of your experiences. Our last meeting will review the transcriptions and summary provided to you. In all, please expect our meetings to take up roughly two to three total hours. All participants will be given the opportunity to select a pseudonym. The selection of a pseudonym will protect the identities and names of the participants involved in the study. All files, audio and written, will be saved on the researcher’s personal computer and an external backup file will be used to store the collected data. No data will be sent to any third parties, and data will be destroyed after three years.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in the study. However, your answers may help us to learn more about how students are interacting with international student support
services, how these services are impacting students’ persistence through their degree programs, and ultimately how these services could be improved for international student population.

**Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner.** Only the researchers will know that you participated in this study. Any reports or publications based on this research will use only group data and will not identify you or any individual as being of this project.

**The decision to participate in this research project is up to you.** You do not have to participate and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may withdraw at any time.

**You will receive a $10 gift certificate to Amazon.com at the end of the interview process.**

**If you have any questions about this study,** please feel free to call Joshua Bass at 410-925-8093 or by email at bass.jo@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Ronald Brown at 617-435-8166 or by email at ron.brown1@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**If you have any questions about your rights in this research,** you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep this form for yourself.

Thank you.

Joshua Bass
Appendix E
Interview Guide
Northeastern University – College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

1. I am interested in learning about your experiences in an online learning environment as an international student. Please describe what this is like.

2. Can you tell me what motivations led you to pursue online higher education in the United States of America?
   Possible prompt: Have your motivations changed with pursuing an online degree since you pursued prior educational experiences?
   Possible prompt: How does your employer view your pursuit of a virtual degree from an institution in the United States of America?

3. Describe the services you have utilized in the writing center.
   Possible prompt: Did you find the resources beneficial to your success?

4. I am interested in how students interact with their institution’s service centers. Describe a typical interaction with the institution’s writing center staff members.

5. How would you describe the accessibility of the writing center support services?
   Possible prompt: How searchable was the website when you were looking for webinars or pre-recorded tutorial videos?
   Possible prompt: How searchable were the resources you utilized?

6. Describe what you have learned by utilizing the Writing center at your institution.

7. Could you walk me through the last experience you had with the Writing center, and were your questions address and/or your issue resolved?
   Possible prompt: How was it resolved or unresolved?
   Possible prompt: Describe the level of effort with the action you were required to take.

8. What Writing center services or supportive features would you like to have available at the center that are not currently present in the writing center?
   Possible prompt: Did the lack of these services affect success in your course/degree program?

9. Suppose the Writing center did not exist at your institution, what steps would you take to get writing support?

10. As an online, international student, how do you feel about the feedback that you are getting from writing tutors?
    Possible prompt: Was it constructive and helpful?
Possible prompt: If it was not helpful, were you provided with resources or contact information of those who could assist you with your questions and concerns?

11. Describe the level of feedback you have received from the Writing center.

12. Did the use of the Writing center’s services, resources or staff members encourage or discourage you from continuing in your degree program? Why?

13. Describe a time when you were able to utilize the information you learned through the Writing center in your professional career?

14. Is there anything else you think I should know or you want to tell me?
Appendix F
Interview Guide – Summary of Findings
Northeastern University – College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

1. **Now that you have had a chance to review the summary of our conversations and significant statements, does this summary adequately address your experiences with the writing center?**
   *Possible prompt:* What, if anything needs to be included, removed or amended?

2. **As an online, international student, how do you rate the quality of your online education experience at this institution?**

3. **Has the participation in this research study changed your perceptions of the writing center or other student support services?**
   *Possible prompt:* If so, how have your perceptions changed?
References


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