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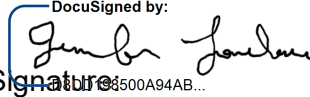
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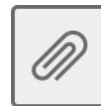
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A Case Study Exploring the Motivating Factors and Needs That Influence Older Adult Learners' Decisions to Enroll and Persist in One University System of Georgia eMajor Collaborative Program

by

Jennifer Angela Hayes

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Degree of Doctor of Education
In Curriculum and Leadership
(Higher Education Administration)

Keywords: Academic Motivation, Collaborative Program, eCampus, eMajor, Older Adult Learner,
Online Learning

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Dedication

This has indeed been a journey, and I owe everything to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who has sustained me and allowed me to press forward despite many challenges, losses, and roadblocks. I am unsure what the future holds for me, but I will listen to Your voice as I use this degree for Your glory.

I would also like to thank my sweet parents, Mr. and Mrs. Leroy (Elsie) Hayes, who supported me every step of the way. My Dad kept me supplied with Bit 'O Honey candy, and my Mom cooked phenomenal meals for me every Sunday. You are an example of God's love, and I appreciate and love you more than you will ever know. My sons, Darren Rashad Jackson, and Justin Alexander Jackson. Thank you for believing in me and for your support. Your Mom is realizing a dream from her youth, and I pray through my example you will come to realize that it is never too late to do anything your hearts' desire and that there is no goal too impossible and unreachable. I love you both beyond measure!

To my love, SGM (Retired, United States Army) Freddie A. Lighty, Jr. Wow! What can I say? You came into my life unexpectedly and fell in line once you understood the magnitude of this task I was facing. You were patient, gave me the space to get the work done, and told me I could do it. Thank you for being your kind, loving, gentle self. I am so blessed that the Lord placed you in my life. You bring me joy.

And lastly, to my Bookie, Dr. Tracy Cyrena Crowder Mitchell. I would not be here had it not been for your prompting, influence, and encouragement! No words can adequately express how much I love and appreciate you. You are my little sister and family for life. Thank you simply for being you. We are Doctors of Education, Bookie! We did it!

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Thank you to my participants who readily agreed to assist in contributing to this research project. Your input was extremely valuable and appreciated. To all older adult learners everywhere. Never allow anyone to shame you into thinking you can’t do something because of your age. We are of value, and we matter!

I would also like to thank my family and friends, especially my big brothers, Leroy, Jr., Michael, and Danny, and my brother in heaven, Larry. A girl could not ask for better brothers or protectors. I also wish to thank my sisters-in-love, Ruby and Janie, for being proud of me; and Helen and Shirley, whom I am sure are smiling down from heaven. To my adopted mom, Mrs. Elma D. Lighty. You are indeed like a mother to me, and I thank God for your influence in my life. Thank you for loving me and always keeping me lifted in prayer. To the Lighty-Damon family, you are all such wonderful people with genuine hearts. God’s love truly shines through each of you. You are a blessing.

Lastly, to my soror and work bestie, the late Dr. Amy Rebecca Savage Austin. I still can't believe you're gone. eCampus will never be the same. I miss you dearly and appreciate your wisdom and strength. I will forever hold on to your last words of advice to me about this process, "Suck it up and get it done! You can cry when it's over".

Vita/Resume

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OVERVIEW OF QUALIFICATIONS

- Experienced in providing program development and advisement/counseling services to students in the post-secondary/higher educational setting, as well as, at-risk students making career/educational decisions.
- Skilled at developing partnerships with community-based organizations and various student-led groups.
- Strong ability to develop and implement successful program initiatives.
- Excellent written and oral communication skills coupled with strong interpersonal qualities.
- Directs activities associated with educational programs and services.
- Coordinates all support staff, projects, operations and activities related to the academic preparation and performance of program participants.
- Assesses procedures to determine if program objectives are being met; thereby identifying and resolving potential issues.
- Prepares weekly and monthly narrative and statistical reports for dissemination.
- Conducts seminars that clearly articulate the mission and goals of various student related programs and projects.
- Functioned as Records Administrator for the Georgia Department of Human Services, ensuring uniformity and clarity of all program records.
- Proficient at the following:

Microsoft Office	Banner 9	Argos	Brightspace D2L
OU Campus	Ellucian DegreeWorks	SEADS	EAB Navigate
Four Winds Interactive	EMS Web App	OrgSync	Salesforce

 Also knowledgeable and proficient at operating database systems and various social media platforms.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA
November 2010 – present

University System of Georgia eCampus – *Academic Advisor* **Carrollton, Georgia**
August 2018 - present

Coordinates and facilitates direct academic advising for select eCampus courses and online programs in collaboration with member eCampus institutions and stakeholders. Builds strong connections with existing partnerships to foster a solid pathway for students and provides direct student outreach and coaching, with a focus on individual assessment. Comprehensively assesses current students' existing coursework and then guides students to appropriate course schedules, utilizing data analytics to assess effectiveness. In addition, utilizes innovative methods to connect with a diverse student population and works closely with the eCampus enrollment team to determine future course schedules, as well as, analytically assesses, reports, and devises methods to continuously improve services and outcomes. Developed eCampus academic advising model and reference and training guide.

UWG Newnan - *Academic Instructional Support Specialist* **Newnan, Georgia**

Division of Academic Affairs**October 2013 – July 2018**

Provided administrative and academic instructional support services to students in Newnan and previously Douglasville, as well as support for virtual classroom technologies and related services for faculty, students, and staff. Functioned as liaison to the UWG Newnan - Student Affairs Enrollment Management Office, monitored classrooms and reported issues to UWG Newnan's Assistant Director and ITS, if needed. Provided general academic advising; informs students of available university services and eligibility requirements, represented UWG Newnan and its programs at Preview Days, orientations, and college fairs at high schools. Maintained data regarding UWG Newnan facilities, enrollment, student applications, and worked with Center's administrative team in implementing retention strategies. Maintained faculty travel records, class and auxiliary room utilization reports, faculty and student listservs, Center's website and *Four Winds* interactive boards. Also, planned and taught UWG 1101 – First Year University Experience course to incoming freshmen, as well as, Core Area B2 course XIDS 2002 on What Do You Know About (WDYKA) Decision Making.

EXCEL Center - Academic Advisor**Carrollton, Georgia****Division of Student Affairs****November 2010 – September 2013**

Advised students who had not declared a major, were early and pre-Arts & Sciences majors, and students seeking admission to selective programs. Major duties and responsibilities included identifying the level of academic risk in new students by using current tools or cultivating new ones and developing and implementing systematic methods for increasing contact with students identified as at-risk; responding to Early Alert academic warnings from UWG faculty and staff; assisting students in exploring career options in relation to their academic interest areas or programs of study; advising a caseload of undergraduate students on academic matters following a holistic philosophy of academic advisement; working with other EXCEL Center staff members to assist all students in their academic success at UWG; developing and presenting recruitment and retention programming; referring students to appropriate departmental offices, faculty, and support services for help with academic, personal, career counseling, academic skills development, and financial aid; maintaining systematic and frequent contact with advisees; maintaining detailed records of conferences with advisees; participating in orientation sessions, workshops, and other programs; serving as liaison to department, office or college; advocated on behalf of students with faculty, staff, colleagues, and parents, as appropriate. Supervised one student assistant and one graduate assistant.

HOLYOKE COMMUNITY COLLEGE**Holyoke, Massachusetts****TRIO/Upward Bound Program*****Assistant Director/Special Programs Coordinator*****January 2009 – August 2010**

Worked closely with students, parents, teachers and guidance counselors to ensure appropriate academic development and success of low-income and first-generation to college students. Program offerings include a six-week residential and commuter summer academic program, after school tutoring and mini courses that assist students improve and advance academically. Also, managed, processed and distributed confidential and sensitive documentation, as well as, provided and distributed pertinent information to staff and program collaborators. Supervised as many as 75 professional, residential, student assistants, and administrative staff.

JOBS FOR BAY STATE GRADUATES, INC.**Holyoke High School (1998- 2009)*****Career Specialist/Counselor*****High School of Commerce (1994 – 1998)****February 1994 to January 2009**

Prepared high school students for transition from school-to-work by creating, organizing and administering programs to provide them with opportunities for training in employability skills, job or career information finding skills, math and reading skills and basic occupational skills. For evaluation purposes, recorded and

documented student attendance and progress in all training activities and creates, as well as conducted an on-going job development plan in an attempt to place students in full-time entry level positions upon graduation. Supervised a team of five professional staff.

UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS

Amherst, Massachusetts

Career/Academic Advisor

Donahue Institute for Governmental Services

September 1991 to August 1993

Provided a full array of re-employment/re-training and academic advisement services to dislocated individuals, including on-site orientation, resume review/development, job readiness/career counseling, job development and referral to other services. Also designed, implemented and monitored pre-educational, pre-occupational and occupational training programs; produced and used employee-marketing materials for outreach efforts.

GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF LABOR

LaGrange, Georgia

Employment Counselor

April 1990 to April 1991

Implemented the dislocated worker program for approximately 600 participants. Provided career counseling, comprehensive assessment of individual's skills and abilities and conducted weekly Job Search/Jobs Skills Workshops. Coordinated the publication of the Employee Handbook and developed various workshop materials for exclusive Department of Labor use.

THE CRAWFORD CENTER

LaGrange, Georgia

Human Services Provider

January 1986 to July 1989

Served as Social Worker to approximately 60 adults and children. Provided various case management services; functioned as Records Administrator and instructed staff in the areas of CPR and First Aid.

EDUCATION

COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY, Columbus, Georgia

Doctor of Education Degree, Curriculum and Leadership – Higher Education Administration

UNIVERSITY OF WEST GEORGIA, Carrollton, Georgia

Specialist of Education Degree, Media – Instructional Technology

CAMBRIDGE COLLEGE, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Master of Education Degree, Integrated Studies

LAGRANGE COLLEGE, LaGrange, Georgia

Bachelor of Arts Degree, Social Work

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT/AFFILIATIONS

- University System of Georgia Advising Academy
- Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP) Summit
- Association of Title IX Administrators (ATIXA) Level One Training
- UWG Civil Rights and Title IX Investigator Training/Active Investigator
- UWG Fraternity and Sorority Life Advisors Summit
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. - Kappa Delta Chapter

On Campus Advisor – University of West Georgia

- UWG Center for Student Involvement *Advisor Development Series*
- UWG Newnan Annual Proctoring Training
- Leadercast Metropolitan Atlanta
- Social Media Marketing Certification
- Essential Communication in the Workplace
- Darkness to Light Training
- Extended Learning Dean's Engagement Committee
- National Academic Advising Association (NACADA)
- Professional Association of Academic Advisors (PAAA)
- National and Regional College Testing Association

Abstract

This qualitative case study seeks to examine older adult learners' views toward technology use and their motivation, needs, and experiences while enrolled in the eMajor online Organizational Leadership bachelor's degree program offered by the University System of Georgia (USG). The research will investigate what motivates students to enroll in and advance through a degree program and their present technological competencies in relation to online learning management systems. The case study will also strive to identify the demands of older adult learners and the influence online learning has on their drive for program completion. Qualitative data were collected from twelve older adult learners, 45 years of age and older, from one eMajor collaborative program at three partner University System of Georgia institutions through semi-structured virtual interviews. The four themes that emerged from the interviews, program, degree, instructor influence, technology, online learning, and needs and experiences helped answer the guiding research questions. The study's results revealed how older adult learners perceive the use of technology in higher education to increase academic achievement, learning comprehension, and course tasks. The current study sought to further assist higher education administrators and leaders understand older adult learners' needs and motivators and how to better support these learners in an online environment.

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Chapter I: Introduction

Technology transforms how individuals obtain knowledge, connect and engage in leisure activities, and perform their occupations in today's rapidly evolving, information-rich world (DuPuis et al., 2016). Technology has permeated every part of our lives, transforming how we work, learn, and function as consumers. Technology is inevitable; it encompasses all aspects of life, from the need to connect with others to our ability to contribute to the environment around us (DuPuis et al., 2016, Knight & Knight, n.d.). According to research conducted by Sivakumaran and Lux (2011), adult learners have become more aware of technology's critical role in modern education. It is essential to identify and alleviate the anxiety associated with technology use for some. Older adult learners must adequately utilize technology to be productive in a culture where the rapid growth of new knowledge and communication technologies has become convenient (DuPuis et al., 2016).

Adult learners, a rapidly rising segment of the postsecondary market, are drawn to online education because of its flexibility and convenience (Kazis et al., 2007). Older adult learners who participate in online degree programs must use and, in some cases, further develop technical skills as part of their educational program (Newman et al., 2015). Adult learners' ability to explore, investigate, and evaluate course material can be enhanced through technology in the classroom (Newman et al., 2015). Technology can also help students improve their problem-solving, decision-making, and communication skills by collaborating and exchanging ideas with their course mates and instructors (Newman et al., 2015). Thereby, older adult learners can become educated, dependable, and contributing citizens by utilizing technology in education to learn how to acquire knowledge and stay current in an ever-changing society (Newman et al., 2015). Technology may motivate engagement in those who would not otherwise participate in

adult education and enable them to engage in more meaningful learning (Ginsburg, Sabatini, & Wagner, 2015).

Online learning is not a new phenomenon (Kentnor, 2015). Chen et al. (2008) recognized online education as one of the fastest-growing segments of higher education, consisting of various delivery methods, such as blended learning and hybrid courses. According to a feature in Eutopia (2007), incorporating technology into education has revolutionized educational progress, and its integration into higher education is critical to the learning and teaching processes. Simonson, Smaldino et al. (2012) discovered that online learning programs were initially integrated into higher education in the 1980s, with rapid growth and development throughout the 1990s. In the late 1990s, many institutions were adopting online programs with an increase in online enrollment (Simonson et al., 2012). Allen and Seaman (2014) reported that online education continued to increase during the first decade of the twenty-first century, with over three million learners enrolled in at least one online course in the fall of 2005 and reaching over six million learners by the decade's end. With an average annual growth rate of 18 percent, online enrollment has significantly outpaced the two percent average for traditional learners throughout the same time (Allen et al., 2011). By 2010, traditional enrollment growth had slowed down considerably, while enrollment of online adult learners continued to rise (Allen et al., 2011). Allen & Seaman (2014, 2015) discovered that by 2012, one in every three adult learners was enrolled in at least one online course.

Research conducted by Parsad et al. (2008), revealed that the computer age heralded a new era of distance learning, aided further by the internet age. Technological advances made it easier to access and navigate the World Wide Web. Early in the twenty-first century, online education in the United States had become an all-encompassing form of distance education, with

more than 90 percent of degree-granting universities and colleges offering online course delivery (Parsad et al., 2008). The inclusion of technology in online education, according to Kentnor (2015), is no longer a trend but is mainstream.

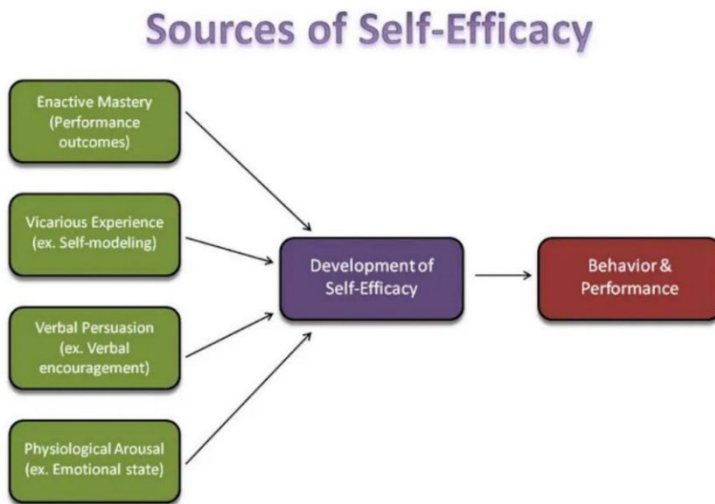
Throughout an older adult's life, numerous developments and breakthroughs in technology have occurred (Heinz et al., 2013). In light of technological advancements over the years, many older adult learners today have the enthusiasm, drive, and determination to become acquainted with technology, even more so if those technological developments appear to be beneficial, such as maintaining their quality of life (Heinz et al., 2013). Furthermore, adult learners are motivated to learn and cultivate the skills needed to complete an online degree program, as technology in the classroom has the potential to improve the performance of adult learners through the development of new instructional and educational approaches (Vassiliou & McAleese, 2014). However, some adult learners express apprehension and reluctance at the prospect of exploring the idea of becoming proficient in the use of technology that does not include, for instance, well-designed structured courses, engaging, collaborative activities, an interactive learning community, and a mini tutorial that addresses common issues (Alhamad et al., 2014). It is vital to research this issue to acquire greater knowledge of the needs and experiences of older adult learners in online undergraduate degree programs where technological savvy is lacking (Sogunro, 2014). The adult learner's desire to complete an online degree program reinforces the need for this project to examine how older adult learners' motivation and perception of technology in higher education are instrumental in their quest to achieve academic success and earn their college degrees. Thereby, this case study aims to analyze how adult online learners who use technology in one University System of Georgia (USG) eMajor

program define their online experiences, the difficulties they encounter, and the motivations they possess to continue learning in the face of such barriers.

Background of the Problem

The researcher will seek to understand the older adult learner's perceptions of using technology while earning an undergraduate degree in the Organizational Leadership degree program via USG eMajor collaborative. Therefore, the self-efficacy learning theory (see Figure 1) and constructivism learning paradigm (see Figure 2) will guide this case study to determine adult learners' perceptions, needs, and experiences. According to a study by Kapur (2015), the adult learner is a mature full-time or part-time student involved in a systematic learning process, whether formal or informal. These learners come from all walks of life, with varying needs, problems, and general outlooks on their various pathways. Because adult learners are at different stations in life, their self-determination motivates them to accomplish their goals. In this case, the adult learner's vision is to complete a college education (Kapur, 2015, p. 114).

Figure 1

Sources of Self-Efficacy

Note. Self-efficacy theory: Bandura's four sources of efficacy beliefs (iEduNote, 2019, para. 7).

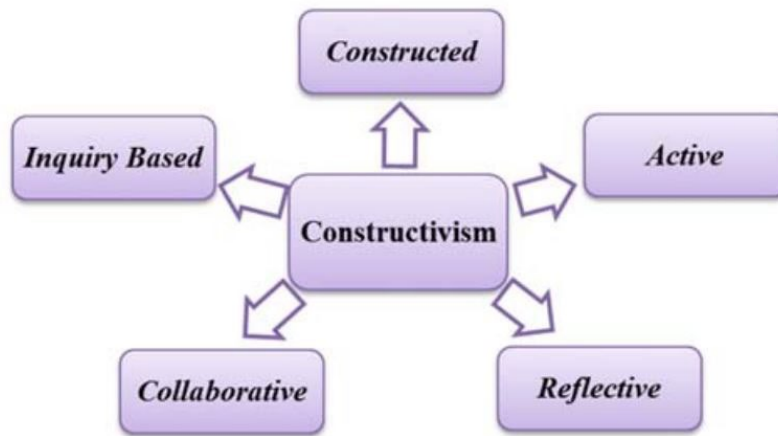
Bandura (1977) discovered that psychological processes of any kind alter the degree and intensity of self-efficacy. Personal efficacy criteria determine when a coping activity begins, how much effort is expended, and how long the person will cope with problems and aversive experiences (Cherry, 2020). de Fatima Gauloa (2014) concluded that self-efficacy is related to the belief that everyone must evaluate their abilities to perform a given task successfully. This concept strongly influences the study's approach, persistence to accomplish the same, and effort level. Also, de Fatima Gauloa (2014) further demonstrated that online learning systems require learners' greater autonomy, perseverance, and effort in learning tasks, which brings a keen awareness of the degree of self-efficacy of learners involved. These factors align with self-efficacy and the academic achievement goals of the adult learner.

Golder (2018) stated that constructivism is a psychological learning theory that explains how individuals obtain knowledge and learn (see Figure 2). As a result, it has a direct application in education. According to the theory, humans construct knowledge and meaning from their

experiences (Golder, 2018). According to Von Glasersfeld (1995), learning requires self-regulation and the creation of conceptual frameworks through reflection and abstraction rather than a stimulus-response occurrence. Students learn by combining new information with what they already know. Constructivists believe that the context in which a concept is taught and students' beliefs and attitudes influence learning (Von Glasersfeld, 1995).

Figure 2

Learning in Constructivism



Note. Constructivism: A paradigm to revitalize teacher education. (Srivastava & Dangwal, 2017, p.755).

Kapur (2015) describes the adult learner with many characteristics. Those characteristics relating to this case study are self-motivation and self-responsibility. The adult learner does not blame others and accepts full responsibility for their successes or failures. Adult learners are voluntary and motivated learners. Their motivation to learn depends on their immediate needs, such as a job promotion or raise. This portion of the learning theory directly touches on the research question regarding which motivating factors contributed to the adult learner's decision to seek an online undergraduate degree. Self-efficacy theory illustrates why it is essential to

understand how being an adult learner impacted their decision to transition into higher education and their experiences with other learners and faculty as older students.

Adult learners in higher education are a global norm. Today, adult learners must update their knowledge for skills improvement, job advancement, and personal growth and understanding (Post University, 2020). Incorporating technology into education has revolutionized the educational process, and its integration into higher education is critical to learning and teaching (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). There is still significant uncertainty about technology's effectiveness in student learning and teaching approaches; academia must understand its role in affecting the outcomes of learning engagement for older adults (Geneel & Saracaloglu, 2018). This case study aims to discover how older adult learners see the use of technology in higher education to improve their academic achievement, their comprehension of learning, and their perception of how the use of technology will enhance their course tasks. These factors are essential since motivation and perception are critical components of the learning process, as it is how individuals interpret their experiences.

Research conducted by (Kara et al., 2019) stated that although online learning allows adult learners to continue their education, there are still barriers to their participation in educational processes. One such barrier is the inability to adequately navigate the learning management system (Biney, 2019). These students would benefit from having a complete online tutorial integrated into the course, as the learning experience is also influenced by interactions with tutors or facilitators, peers, and instructional resources (Hascher, 2010). Technical support for online classes and other institutional factors is generally beyond the control of the online student (Yang et al., 2017). Lee and Choi (2011) examined the factors influencing students' decisions to drop out of online courses from the student's perspectives, the course or program,

and the environment. This high dropout rate concerns educators since failure to complete an online course may dissuade students from enrolling in additional online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011). Researchers attribute dissatisfaction with technical and content issues and interactions with professors (Jonassen et al., 2003; Mumtaz, 2000). There is specific dissatisfaction with teaching related to their training of students in how to use the learning management platform, how assessments were conducted, difficulty understanding content, and inappropriateness of the content (Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2015). When students feel incapable of managing the technology required in their program or when the technology is flawed and difficult to navigate, feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction arise, which can sometimes lead to students withdrawing from the course (Gutiérrez-Santiuste et al., 2015). Radovan (2019) found that the dropout rate in e-learning programs was of most significant importance at the beginning of the program once the participants became acquainted with the virtual learning environment, teachers' requirements, and each other.

Moreover, identifying how to best support adult learners in online programs at the onset is paramount. With increased knowledge of the successful components of an online classroom, academic institutions may be able to retain more online students, continue to grow distance education, improve the distance experience, and cultivate successful learning opportunities for this student population (McKenna, 2018). Implementing a proactive intervention is crucial because it improves academic success (Grabowski et al., 2016). This qualitative case study will further contribute to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by exploring adult online learners' motivation, needs, and experiences within one University System of Georgia (USG) eMajor undergraduate degree program.

Statement of the Problem

This case study focuses on the adult learner's motivation and decision to pursue an online undergraduate degree in Organizational Leadership via one University System of Georgia's (USG) eMajor program and the learners' perception of technology and the needs that accompany their decision. The University System of Georgia (USG) offers an online Bachelor of Science degree in Organizational Leadership that focuses on organizational leadership practices, theories, issues, parameters, and consequences. The curriculum is appropriate for individuals seeking advancement to managerial roles within a business or organization. Concentrations in Healthcare Administration, Office Administration and Technology, Public Service, and newly added Social Justice are available within the curriculum for industry-specific specialization (USG eCampus, 2022). Furthermore, eMajor degrees are offered entirely online via the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) accredited institutions under the University System of Georgia (USG) through a cooperative academic arrangement with USG eCampus providing operational support (USG eCampus, 2022). eMajor programs leverage the strength and educational experience of multiple USG institutions to offer online degrees that prepare students for Georgia and beyond workforce demands. eMajor degrees are suitable for conventional students who prefer to take advantage of online course delivery and working professionals, military members, transfer students, and those seeking a convenient, flexible, and economical route to degree completion (USG eMajor, 2021). Online degrees that educate students about the profession are available from colleges and universities the student currently knows and trusts (USG eCampus, 2022).

Adult learners can be divided into two groups based on their ages: young adults and older adults (Kara et al., 2019). On the other hand, adult learners may also be classified as those who

continue their education while balancing their family and work and who are generally older than 22 (Kahu et al., 2013), which distinguishes them from traditional learners. Additionally, adult learners, according to Jameson and Fusco (2014), are distinct by their ability to incorporate a wide variety of learning methods, such as using their prior experiences, an eagerness to learn, problem-solving skills, being very self-directed, having a high degree of intrinsic motivation, and the ability to self-monitor. For this case study, the adult learner focus will be on those 45 years of age or older. This age group is the population that requires more assistance with technology in the eMajor degree program. This population of adult learners' decisions to return to or attend college are influenced by their motivations and needs at this point in their lives.

The University System of Georgia's Board of Regents regulated the admission and registration of individuals 62 years of age and older, according to the University of Georgia Registrar's Office (2022). Individuals in this category are permitted to enroll in classes on a space-available basis and are exempt from paying tuition or other mandatory expenses. According to Georgia Board of Regents Policy 4.2.1.5. Persons Aged 62 and Older, affords Georgia citizens over the age of 62 the ability to earn a college degree at no cost. The policy, as outlined by the Georgia Board of Regents (University System of Georgia, 2022), is as follows:

Pursuant to the provisions of the Georgia Constitution, the USG establishes the following rules with respect to enrollment of persons 62 years of age or older in USG programs. To be eligible for enrollment under this provision such persons:

1. Must be residents of Georgia, 62 years of age or older at the time of registration and shall present a birth certificate or other comparable written documentation of age to enable the institution to determine eligibility.

2. May enroll as a regular or auditing student in courses offered for resident credit on a "space available" basis without payment of fees, except for supplies, laboratory or shop fees.
3. Must fulfill USG and institution criteria. In rare situations, colleges may waive high school graduation and test scores. Universities provide diagnostic processes for discretionary admission to see if Learning Support is needed before enrolling in regular credit courses. Many classes have prerequisites. All student and institution records must be kept. However, such learners are not reported for budget purposes.
4. Must meet all USG, institution, and legislated degree requirements for degree-seeking students.
5. May not enroll in dental, medical, veterinary, or law schools under the provisions of this policy (para. 23).

As a result, Georgia colleges and universities are seeing an increase in this population beginning or returning to school. This increase in enrollment is particularly true in the technical college system that, according to Lee (2020), has historically serviced a sizable proportion of older students, with an enrollment of older adults increasing to over 40%, especially during economic downturns. While USG eCampus offers comprehensive programs to Georgia students, several colleges and universities throughout the United States offer similar programming. These programs provide similar opportunities to the citizens in each state and beyond. According to Stansbury (2014), there are ten advantages of online courses:

1. Badges/specialization: Online certificates for varying levels of work and engagement, including specific abilities or achievements. Data science, entrepreneurship, web

programming, cyber security, reasoning, and technical writing are among the online courses/certificates available.

2. Mobile access via smartphones and tablets. Thirteen percent of student report taking class notes on their smartphones, 33 percent use tablets for work, and 37 percent read eBooks on mobile devices.
3. Effectiveness: Research shows that online students achieve the same or better learning results in half the time as those in traditional courses.
4. Tangible skill building attributed online literacy skill building, badges, and completion rates.
5. Varied, useful courses, with over 130,000 courses from over 350 providers.
6. Reduced cost, thanks to limited commuting, lower course material costs, and reduced or free tuition.
7. Personalized learning: Students can learn when they want to, where, and how.
8. Accessibility, since most online course support special needs students.
9. Better teaching: Though this is currently under national debate, the infographic notes that teachers in online courses are often trained by ed-tech experts, have field experience, and use multimedia teaching techniques.
10. Cutting-edge technology, such as virtual classrooms, discussion forums, online texts, online libraries, video lectures, and more (paras. 1-10).

Adult learners, also referred to as nontraditional students returning to college, are a global phenomenon. Today, adult learners need to update their knowledge for skills improvement, job advancement, and personal growth and understanding (Lawson, 2005). Research conducted by Allen et al. (2007), revealed that adult learners valued the convenience and flexibility that online

learning provided; however, not all adult students were comfortable with online courses. Online classes and blended learning gained popularity among nontraditional students, particularly adult learners because they provided the flexibility that working adult students require (Wyatt, 2011). Katsio (2015) discovered that student motivation, academic achievement, and persistence in higher education were critical for society's continued success, the workforce, leadership, and the population's essential thinking skills.

Purpose of the Study

This case study aims to investigate older adult learners' attitudes toward technology use, as well as their motivation, needs, and experiences while enrolled in the University System of Georgia's (USG) eMajor online Organizational Leadership undergraduate degree program. The research will focus on what motivates students to enroll and progress in the degree program and understand their current technological abilities relative to online learning management systems. This case study will also seek to understand the older adult learner's needs and how online learning affects student attrition for this population.

The motivation, needs, and experiences of online undergraduate degree programs will be defined through semi-structured interviews examining older adult students for one semester. The case study results will help eCampus administrators create a more effective platform to help reduce student retention and assist area employers in better educating their workforce.

Research Questions

Motivation is critical to an adult online learner's success (Kim, 2009). Koyuncuoğlu (2021) defines academic motivation as the students' desire, level of interest, and tenacity in a course subject and their proficiency outcomes compared to their performance requirements.

The following research questions will guide this study:

Research Question 1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?

Research Question 2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?

Additionally, the researcher will seek to ascertain how older adult learners regard the use of technology in higher education to improve their academic performance. Additionally, the researcher will seek to understand these adult learners' perceptions, motivations, and needs relative to using technology to enrich their learning and knowledge while enrolled in the Organizational Leadership degree program.

Theoretical Framework

This research will follow the self-efficacy theory and constructivist educational paradigm because of the need to understand the online learner's historical and cultural perspective as they move through the degree-seeking process. The intent is to rely on the adult, online learner's experiences and views as they create meaning (Arghode et al., 2017). The learners' belief in their ability to control their functioning and life occurrences can serve as a springboard for inspiration, well-being, and personal accomplishment (Lopez-Garrido, 2020). Research by Jordan (2013) revealed that constructivism holds that learners create new knowledge through cooperation, reflection, and personal experience. The constructivist approach has been used extensively as a conceptual framework for research involving virtual learning environments (Mikropoulos & Natsis, 2010).

Therefore, this case study will focus on what motivates students to enroll and progress in the degree program and understand their current technological abilities and needs relative to online learning management systems. The case study will further contribute to the knowledge

needed to address the reasons for enrolling in an online program and the older adult learner's technological expertise by exploring the perception, motivation, needs, and experiences within one USG eMajor undergraduate Organizational Leadership degree program.

Methodology Overview

The research will follow the constructivist educational paradigm and self-efficacy theory because of the need to understand the online learner's historical and cultural perspective as the learner moves through the degree-seeking process (Arghode et al., 2017). The qualitative case study approach will allow the opportunity to collect and analyze narrative-based data via individual interviews and help determine what factors contributed to the participant's decision to seek an online education through the University System of Georgia (USG) eMajor Organizational Leadership degree program.

Delimitations and Limitations

The qualitative case study design employed within the constructivist framework dictates the importance of the individualized experiences of the participants and the intimate exploration of those events by the researcher. Different perspectives exist within the social constructivist framework, and knowledge is built based on these differing perspectives. As a result, generalizing results to a sample more extensive than those involved in this study is difficult.

Several limitations were considered when evaluating the findings of this current study. First, this study exclusively explored and described the experiences of older adult online learners who volunteered as participants. The older adult learners' experiences were not compared to the experiences of their traditional peers. Second, due to the study's qualitative nature, there was a small sample size of undergraduate students. The study's findings were restricted to the older

adult learners at three collaborative programs in one online degree program. They did not represent all older adult learners in other majors or at other partner institutions.

Thus, delimitations were also considered. A potential contributor to researcher bias is the researcher's professional experience as an academic advisor in an online learning environment. In her position, the researcher has numerous opportunities to counsel and advise older adult learners during their first semester of enrollment and after the adult learner has earned 45 credit hours or more within the environment under investigation. The university's centralized Advising Center meets the needs of the students under the 45-credit hour mark as part of an agreement with USG eCampus. Using inductive reasoning to identify emergent themes within this research project allows the researcher to adjust the scope and direction of this research based on the participants' lived experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) rather than the researcher's history as an older adult learner advisee or an academic advising practitioner. Despite these limitations and delimitations, this study provided insight into the motivating factors, needs and experiences of older adult learners in one USG eCampus online collaborative program.

Definition of Terms

The following section defines key terms used in this study. This lack of clarity within the profession emphasizes the critical need for term clarification within the research project.

- *Academic advising* synthesizes and contextualizes individuals' educational experiences within the frameworks of their objectives, abilities, and lifestyles to extend learning beyond school boundaries and timeframes (NACADA: The Global Community for Academic Advising. (2006).

- *Academic Advisor* refers to the individual employed by the collaborative program with academic counseling responsibilities for this research project (University System of Georgia eCampus, 2021).
- *Academic motivation* is described as a student's desire or interest in learning and their educational experience (Hulleman et al., 2016).
- *Adult learner* refers to age (especially being over the age of 24) as this population's defining characteristic (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).
- *Attrition* refers to a drop in the number of learners or students enrolled in a course of study, which may be a degree program or a stand-alone online course. Attrition occurs when a student withdraws from a course of study for any reason (Martinez, 2003).
- *Collaborative program* refers to specific institutions within the University System of Georgia that offer the undergraduate degree program used in this research project (University System of Georgia eCampus, 2021).
- *Motivation*, according to Pintrich and Schunk (2002), is the process by which goal-directed behavior is initiated and perpetuated.
- *Older Adult Learner* for the purposes of this case study will be defined as learners over the age of 45. Cummins et al. (2019) reported that older adult learners often have family and work responsibilities as well as other life circumstances that can interfere with successful completion of educational objectives.
- *Online Degree Program* refers to the use of the internet for instructor-learner interaction and class material dissemination (India Education, 2021).

- *Online Learning* is a term that refers to a course or program in which the majority or all of the content is delivered online and there are typically no in-person meetings (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010). Online education will also be reference to as distance learning, distance education, or e-learning.
- *Persistence* refers to the act of continuously pursuing an educational objective or goal (Martinez, 2003).
- *University System of Georgia (USG) eCampus* is a service unite of the University System of Georgia that assists USG accredited institution administers quality, affordable, high-demand, postsecondary online degrees (University System of Georgia eCampus, 2021).
- *University System of Georgia (USG) eMajor* refers to online degree programs with partner USG institutions (University System of Georgia eCampus, 2021).

Significance of the Study

This case study investigates the perspectives of adult learners enrolled in a completely online degree program. This case study paves the way for future research into the experiences of these students and the professionals who guide them. Furthermore, because of broader consumer needs and economic circumstances, the online degree program has a unique opportunity to broaden its reach.

Summary

Colleges and universities play intricate roles in online learning, preparing adult learners for degree conferral, transfer, skill, and workforce development. According to Kapur (2015), adult learners have amassed vast knowledge by controlling their environment and life experiences. Their defining characteristics are their opinions, values, and beliefs, which they

bring to the learning situations. To avoid undermining adult learners' self-esteem, educators must treat them with respect and equality. Any learning process designed for adult learners must be tailored to their specific needs (United States Department of Education, 2018). Like many online college students, adult learners must balance various roles and responsibilities (University of Arizona, 2020).

On the other hand, adult learners frequently demonstrate a tremendous work ethic and persistence in approaching their work while lacking tangible academic skills and confidence in the virtual classroom. This work ethic exemplifies the one-of-a-kind case of the online adult learner, who is dedicated but frequently underprepared. As a result, the perceptions of those tasked with successfully guiding their academic progress and personal development are essential. Given the current local and national programs to support online college program access, success, and affordability, online degree program popularity and necessity have increased college enrollment. Institutional funding tied to student success metrics such as retention, completion, and credit progression toward a credential continue to spread, elevating student success from a student-level concern to an organizational, state, and national problem. Higher education administrators, whose responsibilities include academic, student, and financial services, are preparing their institutions to meet their students' needs and assist them in attaining these indicators (Higher Education Act, 2021).

Chapter II: Literature Review

This case study will concentrate on the experiences of older adult learners aged 45 and up enrolled in the University System of Georgia (USG) eMajor Organizational Leadership online degree program. A critical literature review was conducted to understand how self-perceived motivation and readiness for self-directed learning influenced older adult learners. In Chapter Two, the researcher will discuss the history of online knowledge, the history of adult education and learning, retention in online and distance learning, the gap in the literature relative to older adults in online learning programs, the USG eMajor degree program, Organizational Leadership, other eCampus programs in the United States, the theoretical framework, and an overview of the methodology. The literature review will also examine older adult learners' characteristics, their work and academic responsibilities, and the motivating factors that influence their desire to seek an undergraduate degree online.

The relationship between older adult learners' academic motivation to remain engaged in an online course was explored using current and historical research on theories of motivation, the adult learner, and the online learning environment. Wigfield and Eccles (2002) revealed that “by focusing on individuals’ beliefs, values, and goals, motivation researchers learned much about the reason why individuals choose to engage or disengage in different activities, and how individuals’ beliefs, values, and goals relate to their achievement behaviors” (p. 127). The viewpoint of adult online learners on how academic motivation affects their learning in a technology-based environment is a unique concept that has been difficult to come across, as it is “difficult to understand student’s motivation without understanding the contexts they are experiencing” (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002, p. 128).

This study employed adult learning theories, including andragogy (Knowles, 1980; 1989; 1990), self-directed learning (Merriam Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), and transformative learning (Merriam, 2004, Mezirow, 1991). The study will strive to increase knowledge of how academic motivation influences adult online learners' success in completing online courses and, as a result, degree programs, based on the literature review. The case study will also examine the literature on adult online learners, motivation, technology-based learning environments, and other elements that can aid in better understanding learners' perspectives and experiences with online learning. This study will add to the identified research challenge by filling a gap in the literature about older adult online learners' perceptions of how academic motivation influences their overall success in an online learning environment.

Because the adult learner's presence is evident in higher education classrooms, whether face-to-face, hybrid, or wholly online, it is clear that support is required for those students who require aid to succeed in their chosen program (Ross-Gordon, 2011). The motivation for this case study is to better understand the unique requirements for this group of learners' capacities to succeed in their coursework and studies.

The first step in understanding adult learners' needs is improving their total learning experience, as described by Pusser et al. (2007). There are four objectives cited:

1. There is no "typical" adult learner. "The adult learner" is a diverse set of individuals with distinctive demographics, social locations, aspirations, and levels of preparation.
2. A key area of adult learning is poorly understood. A vast world of site-based and online, short-term, non-credit classes now serve millions of learners.
3. The well-worn path will not work for most adult learners. Many adult students choose non-traditional paths to postsecondary education because they work, are responsible

for dependents, and can sometimes obtain tuition assistance from an employer if they enroll in a part-time program.

4. To find the right path, adult learners need a guide. Few factors influence adult learners' success more than student/institutional planning and counseling. Mapping the student's path to postsecondary success is crucial (para. 2).

There are several ways colleges and universities can support adult learners in an online learning environment, including administration, professors, and instructional designers (Githens, 2007). Rogers (2000) cited that for "universities to remain competitive in the new millennium, they must develop cohesive training programs with an emphasis on learning and provide adequate technical support that will assist faculty in integrating technology into instruction" (p. 19). Smith's (2002) findings build upon a study conducted by Malcolm Knowles that implied that technological implications of "andragogy" influence the adult learners' learning climate, diagnosis of needs, planning process, learning experience and evaluation of learning" (p.157). This work primarily creates a vehicle to meet adult learners' needs in an online learning environment.

The role professors and instructional designers have in adult learners' success in using technology are paramount (Halupa, 2019). According to Smith (1997), technology has entered academia as an appealing supplement to or replacement for the face-to-face learning experience. Technology is incorporated into courses because administrators expect faculty to create distributed options for the classes (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Through collaboration, both are integral components in creating quality courses, specifically online options (Smith, 1997).

Institutions of higher learning understand that they must remain relevant in technology (Osuji & Oluoch-Suleh, 2015). To remain relevant, these institutions must equip their faculty with professional development opportunities to assist with incorporating technology into the curriculum (Ogle et al., 2002). Better preparing faculty and staff allows for better-created courses, which will maximize the learning experience for the adult learner (Ogle et al., 2002). Faculty and staff can then design online learning environments unique to the learner, as emphasized in a study conducted by Cercone (2008). Additionally, instructors must realize that culture and society uniquely affect each individual (Cercone, 2008). In other words, learners are unique individuals; what may work for one individual may not be successful for another (Cercone, 2008).

As the online adult learner becomes more comfortable using technology, it is also crucial that designers and professors look to develop and design new and innovative practices (Sochor, 2021). This population of learners must remain relevant to the ongoing changes. Thus far, the research suggests a correlation between institutions and faculty and staff in contributing to the success of adult learners' comfort level with using technology (Buabeng-Andoh, 2012). By becoming involved and offering pertinent and ongoing support while building a sense of community, colleges and universities are the leaders in ensuring their success (Kuh et al., 2006).

History of Distance Education and Online Learning

According to Kentnor (2015), distance education is not a novel method of instruction. Kentnor (2015) further stated with 18th-century roots, distance learning has grown in popularity over the last 300 years along with communications technologies. Distance education became popular in the late 1800s, but its rapid rise began in the late 1990s. It's not new phenomenon, but technological advances help it grow. From mail and parcel post to radio, TV, and online

education, distance education's advances in educational technologies and delivery methods have improved the quality of education today (Gensler, 2014).

Historical Roots of Online Learning

According to Florida National University (2019), distance learning dates back to the 1700s. Distance education refers to education delivery via alternative or technology means such as the internet or postal mail (Gleason, 2017; Laaser & Toloza, 2017; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2016). Before the widespread implementation of electronic communications, educators relied on print technology and the postal service for what became known as correspondence education. Starting in the middle of the nineteenth century, correspondence learning for adults, especially those who could not attend colleges or universities, helped thousands of Americans learn new skills for specific jobs and gain access to an abundance of courses and other educational materials in literature, the arts, and science (Saba, 2013).

Correspondence courses were one of the earliest kinds of distance education, with schools sending educational materials and communicating with students via the postal system (Gleason, 2017; Kiryakova, 2019). Saba (2013) credits William Rainey Harper, the University of Chicago's founding president, with pioneering the practice of collegiate correspondence instruction in the United States. Pregowska et al. (2021) revealed that the first correspondence school, the Society for the Promotion of Home Education, was established in 1873 in Boston, Massachusetts. Women from all walks of life were encouraged to enroll, and the school remained a conduit for correspondence instructions for 24 years (Pregowska et al., 2021). Women's desire to learn and increase their knowledge may have played a crucial role in the rise of distance education (Pregowska et al., 2021). Also, in the late nineteenth century, correspondence courses were developed in response to the need to educate rural communities

and the working class (Gleason, 2017). One of the concerns about correspondence courses was the disparity in quality between rural correspondence students and those studying in public environments (Gleason, 2017). The cause for this inequality was the requirement for rural families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to balance schooling and household or farming responsibilities (Gleason, 2017). After World War II, addressing the educational disparity in rural populations and educating returning soldiers increased the number of correspondence courses (Elsom et al., 2017; Gleason, 2017; Kiryakova, 2019). The correspondence course in the post-World War II era consisted mainly of self-paced studies in secretarial and literacy courses (Elsom et al., 2017; Gleason, 2017). Correspondence courses began to transform into more extensive open-access education as technology evolved to incorporate other means of communication (Gleason, 2017).

For nearly 80 years, radio served as an educational medium, ranging from school broadcasting to teaching adults to read, covering basic adult education, and undertaking social action programming (Pregowska et al., 2021). The primary objective of radio-based distance education was not just direct instruction but also to increase listener motivation and mobilization (Pregowska et al., 2021). Additionally, it served as a source of news and information that was not readily available in printed form, particularly in areas far from libraries (Pregowska et al., 2021).

Television quickly became a method of delivery in correspondence courses, with some universities teaching students via public access or closed-circuit television (Orhan Goksun et al., 2018; Zhang & Li, 2019). Students enrolled in distance education would watch a televised lecture broadcast from the school and mail their assignments and tests to the school (Orhan Goksun et al., 2018). Universities with broadcasting capabilities, such as televising live or pre-recorded lectures, quickly adopted an Open University model (Zhang & Li, 2019). The Open

University model is a part-time, open-admission educational model that focuses on adult learners and distance education via traditional and electronic means such as television and radio (Zhang & Li, 2019). With the rise of the Internet, education could soon be delivered on a larger scale for both Open Universities and traditional universities (Zhang & Li, 2019).

Use of Technology in Online Learning

Cook and Sonnenberg (2014) stated that the development of electronic computers could be traced back to the late 1950s. Early networking was conceived in Cold War think tanks and realized by the Defense Department with the establishment of the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network or the ARPANET (Online Library Learning Center, 2022). The Internet concept emerged in the late 1960s and early 1980s with various protocols (Cook & Sonnenberg, 2014). The ARPANET, in particular, prompted the development of federal comprehensive area network protocols for internetworking, which consisted of multiple separate networks linked together to form a network of networks (Roberts, 1967). ARPANET access was expanded in 1981 and later in 1986, resulting in supercomputer sites in the United States for research and education organizations (Barras, 2007; Roberts, 1967). Collaborations between business, government, and universities eventually resulted in rapid progress in the development of the Internet (Cook & Sonnenberg, 2014). Technology innovations paved the way for disruptive innovations (see Table 1), which are innovations that help create a new market and then disrupt an existing market by displacing an earlier technology (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Rosenbloom, 1999). Several disruptive innovations provide students with alternatives to traditional on-campus higher education (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Rosenbloom, 1999). Students can choose from online courses, blended learning, and structured career-focused

learning and are fundamentally changing traditional higher education by choosing these online options (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Rosenbloom, 1999).

Table 1

Phases of Technology Innovations

1960-1980 Incremental Phase	The internet introduced and developed supercomputer sites in the United States for research and education organizations.
1990 – 2010 Semi-Radical Phase	Advancement in technological capacity to store, communicate, compute information, tracking, and digital technologies
2010 – present Disruptive Phase	Digital format in telecommunication and technological memory

Source: Bower and Christensen (1995); Rosenbloom & Spencer (1996).

From 2010 to the present, technology has evolved in three stages (see Table 2): incremental innovative technology, which is an improvement in a product or method (e.g., taking the latest version of a word processing program and creating new types of efficient tools for documentation); semi-radical innovative technology, which relies on existing technological knowledge; and disruptive technology (Schatzberg, 2006). Mobile wireless technologies such as mobile phones, tablets, and laptops are now used for online education, citing the portability and speed of these devices as advantages (Cook & Sonnenberg, 2014).

Table 2

Technology Changes from 1990 to 2010

Incremental Changes	Incremental innovative technology, which is an improvement in a product or method (e.g., taking the latest version of a word processing program and creating new types of efficient tools for documentation)
Semi-Radical Changes	Semi-radical, which innovative technology relies on existing technological knowledge but uses the knowledge differently (e.g. mobiles phones that have become cell phones which are today's personal communication networks)
Disruptive Changes	Innovative disruptive technology, which breaks from the past by pushing aside existing businesses and their supply chains (e.g. digital photography minimized traditional cameras and film; the Internet minimized the U.S. Postal Service because of speed and convenience)

Source: Schatzberg (2006)

Prevalence of Online Learning

The Sveučilište Univerzitet Vitez (2017) cited the emergence of distance learning for acquiring knowledge remotely. It can be characterized as a way of studying tailored to pupils who are physically isolated from lecturers or assistance (Sveučilište Univerzitet Vitez, 2017). Distance education is facilitated by the use of the internet and online technology. According to Parsad et al. (2008), at least two-thirds of two- and four-year Title IV degree-granting colleges provided online or hybrid courses for college credit. Parsad et al. (2008) also reported that 61% of universities offered online courses, 35% offered blended/hybrid courses, and 26% offered various types of distance education, according to a survey. 32% of two-year and four-year colleges offer online degrees or certificates. 68% of responding schools said the necessity to accommodate students' flexible schedules influenced their decision to offer distance education courses or programs. 45% of schools cited boosting student enrollment as a reason for participating in the poll; two-thirds cited offering college access to students who would not otherwise have it.

Benefits of Online Learning

Gautam (2021) reported:

the increased use of online learning tools is the new normal in education in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Educational institutions worldwide are turning to online learning platforms to help colleges and universities continue the process of educating students. Online learning has now emerged as an essential resource for students and institutions worldwide. For many educational institutions, online course delivery is a completely new teaching method that institutions had to adapt. The demand for online learning has increased significantly in recent months and will continue to do so in the future (para. 2).

Individuals who may be unable to attend classes at a traditional brick-and-mortar college prefer an online education (Community College of Aurora, 2022). Some benefits of online learning include flexibility, lower costs, more instructor-student time, access to expertise or the sharing of knowledge, and the ability for more people to gain access to education that is not readily available in some geographic regions (Ilgaz & Gulbahar, 2017)).

Challenges in Online Learning

The internet created a new world of learning opportunities and shifted away from traditional education and toward online learning (Sasseen, 2021). Online education has steadily grown in popularity over the last 20 years. Nearly seven million students are enrolled in distance education courses, representing more than one-third of all college students in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). More students are choosing to earn a degree online for various reasons, including technological advancements, increased accessibility, and the need for a work-life balance (Sasseen, 2021).

Over the last decade, online course enrollment has exceeded traditional college enrollment (Sasseen, 2021). The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) reported between 2000 and 2010, the overall undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 37%, from 13.2 million to 18.1 million, and from 2010 to 2018, the number of students declined by 8%, from 18.1 to 16.6 million.

Ciccarelli (2020) revealed that the argument between online and traditional education continues to grow in importance yearly. Its relevance has increased even more as an unprecedented number of individuals are now learning online. While remote or online learning provides students with unparalleled flexibility and the ability to learn on-demand, postsecondary institutions that offer online eLearning courses benefit from increased recognition in new markets or countries and a more extensive student base to generate revenue (Ciccarelli, 2020). At the same time, it is clear that traditional means of learning, such as in-person instruction and hands-on training from an expert, will always be necessary for some situations (Ciccarelli, 2020).

Because several elements of online and traditional learning contrast with one another, (Ciccarelli, 2020) created a visualization of the two, side by side (see Table 3), to assist in determining which method of educational delivery works best for the adult learner.

Table 3

Online and Traditional Learning Visualization

Online Learning	Traditional Learning
Learn anywhere with an internet connection	Learn in-person in a physical setting
Access content anytime you choose	Adhere to a schedule
Limited socialization and sense of community	Interact with teachers and other students in the classroom
Virtual interaction with course content	Hands-on learning
Employs contemporary technology that comes naturally to students	Conducted in-person using means that most educators are familiar with

Source: (Ciccarelli, 2020)

Overall, traditional learning and online learning have their advantages, and which method is superior depends totally on the preferences, availability of time, and learning styles of the adult students involved in the process (Goura, 2021).

History of Adult Education and Learning

Traditional versus Non-Traditional Learners

Online education has risen in popularity as a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face classes (University of Arizona, 2020). While many traditional-aged students may appreciate the flexibility that online programs provide, it is easy to overlook non-traditional students; adults who may or may not have been able to attend college in their early twenties but are now returning to the classroom (Curran, 2014). Non-traditional students return to school for various reasons (Curran, 2014). In recent years, the number of traditional-age students, 17-24 years of age, in colleges and universities in the United States has decreased. Many of the positions held initially by conventional students have been taken by a new group of students, dubbed non-traditional or adult learners since they are above the age of 25. (McGregor et al. 1991). Non-traditional students are individuals who have returned to school after graduating from high school, and traditional students have entered college after graduating from high school (Curran,

2014). Financial difficulties, starting or planning a family, or taking a full-time job may be why these non-traditional students have decided to return to school later (Curran, 2014).

One of the more significant problems administrators and educators must address when non-traditional students enroll in online courses is the learning curve associated with some of the technology used in these courses and that certain non-traditional students may not completely grasp how to use online platforms or programs at the same rate as traditional students (Curran, 2014). When teaching and offering online programs, educators and administrators must consider that non-traditional students may require additional assistance in comprehending and utilizing the technology used in these classes (Curran, 2014).

Defining the Adult Learner

According to Great Value Colleges (2021), there are five non-traditional students; ones with no high school diploma, single parents, part-time students, those who took a break from school, and independent students. Though some people believe that most or all college students are recent high school graduates, many non-traditional students are attending colleges today (Great Value Colleges, 2021). A traditional college student enrolls full-time immediately following high school graduation and begins classes in the fall. Anyone who does not fit this mold is considered a non-traditional college student (Great Value Colleges, 2021). To closer examine the five types, the source, Great Values Colleges (2021), stated the following:

- Students without a high school diploma: According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), one distinguishing feature of a non-traditional student is the lack of a high school diploma in favor of some certificate. Many states allow students to drop out of high school after they reach the age of 16 and meet certain basic requirements. Students in this situation can enroll in a program and pass a test to

obtain a General Equivalency Diploma, equivalent to a high school diploma. A General Equivalency Diploma student is a non-traditional student.

- **Single Parents:** Single parents are also included in the category of non-traditional students because a high school student can become pregnant and give birth to a child, requiring additional time away from schoolwork. Being a single parent while attending college is challenging because of the time commitment required to complete coursework, work full-time, and look after children.
- **Part-time Students:** To be classed as a full-time student, it is necessary to take at least twelve credit hours per semester. According to the common practice of charging a flat tuition rate, students can take as few as six credits or eighteen credits for the same fee at most colleges. Part-time students can take just one course in a semester or up to eleven credits, but they pay the same tuition rate. Non-traditional college students are those who take fewer courses.
- **Students who took a break from school:** Many American high schools encourage students to enroll immediately in college after graduation. Students who take a break from school after high school is considered non-traditional students. Students may take a year or many years off before returning to school, and some may work for a decade or more before doing so.
- **Independent students:** If an individual is under 24, they must either be in the military, be emancipated from their parents, have children, or be legally married to be considered independent. Every first-year student is not a recent high school graduate with little or no real-world experience. Most college students today have families, spouses, and careers. (para. 2-7).

According to Githens (2007), e-learning and distance education can play a role in helping older adults become integrated with the rest of society. Also, Githens (2007) stated that as demographic and cultural changes affect the place of older adults in society, online learning programs become increasingly appealing to older adults. Githens (2007) further discussed

1. the changing notion of work and learning in older adulthood,
2. the myths about older 'adults' use of technology,
3. the types of e-learning programs for older adults (i.e., programs for personal growth and social change, workforce development, and workplace learning), and
4. the barriers to older 'adults' full participation in e-learning (p. 1).

Moreover, adult learners seeking an education appear to flourish in the online environment more than others since they require specific aspects to gain from the educational process. Adult learners bring various experiences to the online course and draw on previous learning opportunities in anticipation of the new content. They are frequently self-motivated and eager to take charge of their education. As they orient to the new course, and possibly the newness of online learning and instruction, their concepts of themselves as learners become strong and serve as the foundation (Pearson & Kirby, 2020, para. 2).

Adult learners, for example, may be more interested in courses that allow them to be more flexible with their daily schedules, especially regarding family and professions (Hoon et al., 2018). In addition, adult learners, who frequently work full-time or have family commitments, seek flexible programs that will benefit their careers and well-being (Hall, 2021). One characteristic that distinguishes adult learners from other college students is the high likelihood of juggling multiple life roles simultaneously while attending school. These roles may

include a worker, spouse or partner, parent, caregiver, or community member (Hall, 2021). Adult learners may benefit from the social support they provide and the rich life experiences they bring to the table, which may help them make sense of theoretical concepts that may be entirely abstract to younger pupils (Hall, 2021). Yet, their various responsibilities and obligations complicate students' time allocation for academic study and involvement in campus-based groups and activities. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2003), at least 56 percent of students over the age of twenty-four who participated in the 1999 –2000 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study considered themselves to be workers first and students second, with only 26 percent identifying themselves as students who work. Only 18 percent of those enrolled did not work throughout that time (Berker & Horn, 2003). According to the study's findings, the students who first believed employees were married. Their marital status increases their likelihood of having other commitments outside of school, complicating time management. This group was less likely to complete a degree within six years of beginning school (Berker & Horn, 2003).

Adult Learning Theories

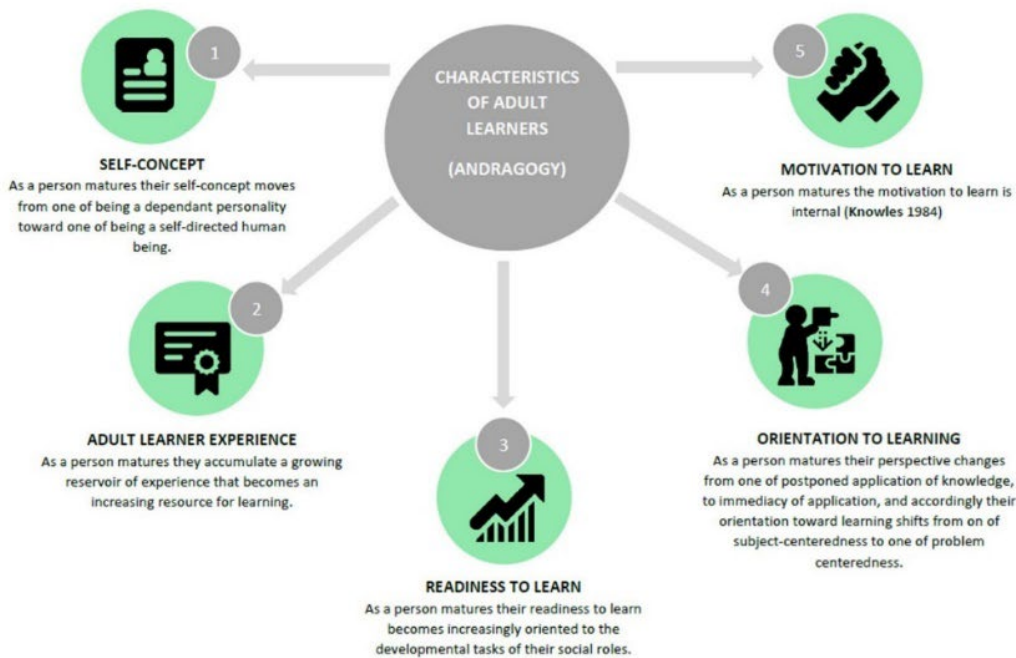
Andragogy. Andragogy is the most well-known of these theoretical approaches, and with good reason. This framework is attributed to Malcolm Knowles for bringing it to the notice of North American policymakers, even though he acknowledged the framework's previous European origins (Knowles, 1980). According to this framework, adults prefer self-direction in learning and bring a vast reservoir of experience to the table that should be considered when designing learning experiences. The adult learner demonstrates a readiness to learn motivated by a desire to know or do something, a task- or problem-centered orientation to learning rather than a subject-centered orientation, and a relatively high level of internal motivation (Knowles, 1980). While researchers have disputed andragogy extensively, pointing

out the contextual factors that influence how adults display these qualities, this framework has remained one of the most durable and often quoted adult learning models for many years (Merriam 2001). According to University of Phoenix contributor Fairbanks (2021), to develop his concept of andragogy, Knowles (1980) identified specific characteristics within adult learners (see Figure 3). These include:

1. A preference for self-directed learning
2. An ability to draw on life experience to assist with learning
3. A willingness to learn when transitioning into new roles
4. A focus on immediately applying new knowledge to real-life situations and problems
5. A tendency to be internally motivated (rather than externally) (para. 4)

Figure 3

Characteristics of Adult Learners (Andragogy)



Note. The Adult Learning Theory Andragogy (Thrush, 2019, para. 3).

Because adult learners face obstacles, there is an even greater need to cater to their educational style and needs. Common barriers to adult learning, whether in the classroom or on the job, include a lack of time, confidence, or competing against a younger, more agile workforce or student peer group, undermining any experienced professional's confidence and financial resources. Returning to school is a financial investment. While the payout may be worthwhile, the initial financial commitment might be intimidating. Fairbanks (2021) further states that adult learning theory allows students to study and improve their lives by providing them with information directly applicable to the actual world. Implementing adult learning theories helps teach adults successfully and gives those individuals a better chance of success.

Self-Directed Learning. In addition to andragogy, some adult learning theories emphasize self-directed learning (see Figure 4), which has been the subject of numerous professional conferences and articles.

Figure 4

Self-Directed Learning



Note. The Basics of Self-Directed Learning for Teachers (Kharbach, 2013, para. 3).

One self-directed learning theory proposed that educational goals within formal education might be supported by teaching methods and assignments that were meant to increase student control of the learning process compared to the instructor's control (Candy, 1991). In other words, according to specific ideas, self-directed learning can be situational and manifest itself at different levels in different age groups of college students when they experience diverse learning settings (Grow, 1991).

Self-directed learning is not a new educational trend. Since Aristotle and Socrates pioneered cognitive development, it has existed and is a natural road to profound insight and efficacy (The Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2019). Petro (2017) stated that by recognizing the various forms of self-directed learning that can occur in the classroom and incorporating it as an integral part of how we learn, colleges and universities could provide a more meaningful learning experience for adult learners that extends beyond the regurgitation of memorized content.

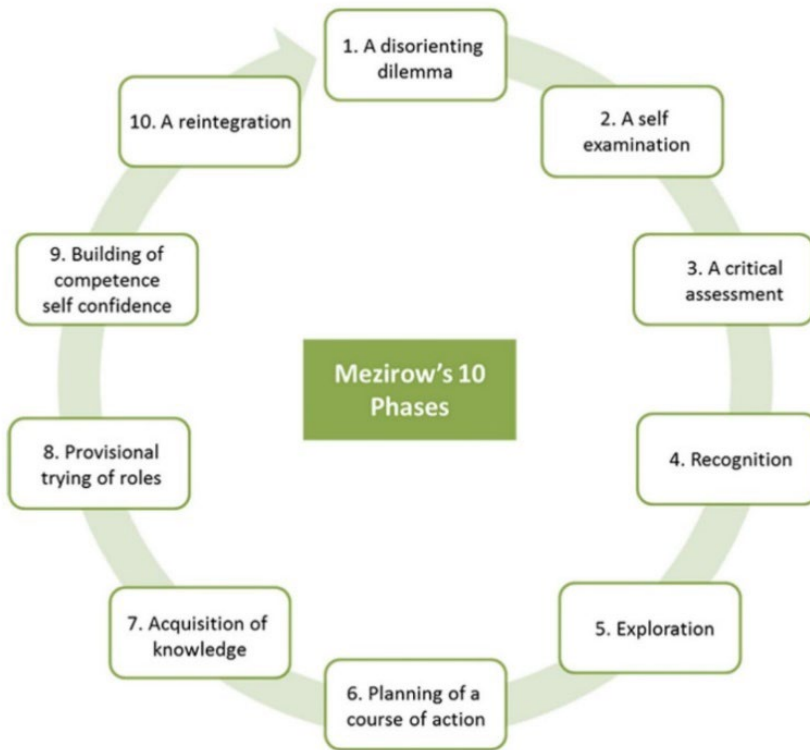
An essential resource for self-directed learning is the adult learner's capacity for awareness of self and reality and in-depth inquiry into both. While there are numerous interpretations of what critical thinking is and does, Ennis (1996) described self-directed learning as "reasonable, reflective thinking directed at deciding what to believe or do" (p.166). Educators frequently refer to critical thinking as the 5 Ws and the H; the What, Why, Who, When, Where, Why, and How (Petro, 2017).

Transformative Learning. The theory of transformative learning has evolved as one of the most prominent and debated theories in adult learning research over the last twenty years, with Mezirow's (2000) version of the theory garnering the most attention. Mezirow's (2012) definition of transformative learning is how previously uncritically assimilated

assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned, thereby becoming more open, permeable, and better validated (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Mezirow's 10 Phases



Note. Leveraging the Power of Transformative Learning in eLearning (CommLab India Bloggers. 2020, para. 5).

Furthermore, transformational learning theory states that how learners interpret and reinterpret their sensory experience is important to producing meaning and learning (Mezirow, 1991). Knowledge is classified as either instrumental or communicative in theory. An emphasis on problem-solving and determining cause-and-effect links is the focus of instrumental learning. Communicative learning refers to how people express their feelings, wants, and desires (Cranton, 2006). Transformational learning encompasses a fundamental shift in adults' primary frames of reference, which typically occurs due to disorienting challenges and situations that cause adults

to rethink their previously held views about the world. Research on transformational learning has focused on transformative learning in higher education and naturally occurs in adult life situations. However, some researchers have proposed that educators can help stimulate transformative learning by applying teaching methods that encourage critical reflection and inquiry in their students (Cranton, 2006).

The New Non-Traditional Learner

The National Center for Education Statistics (2003) notes varying definitions of non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are contrasted with traditional students who "earn a high school diploma, enroll full time immediately after finishing high school, depend on parents for financial support, and either do not work during the school year or work part-time" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1997, p. 151). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) categorized anyone who satisfies at least one of the following as a non-traditional student:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school);
- Attends part-time for at least part of the academic year;
- Works full-time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled;
- Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid;
- Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but may also be caregivers of sick or elderly family members);
- Does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other; high school completion certificate or did not finish high school). (pp. 2-3)

It is unknown when or how the term non-traditional student was first used in educational contexts. However, according to Ross-Gordon (2011), academic scholar K. Patricia Cross is credited with making the phrase the accepted and appropriate to describe adult learners.

Quinn (2018) stated that non-traditional students were the new normal, claiming that most degree seekers were adult learners, a demographic to which educational institutions are increasingly opening doors. According to Quinn (2018), sixty percent of Americans aged 23 to 55 without a bachelor's degree have considered returning to school, but costs and student debt have been deterrents. Some of the main reasons older adults choose to pursue a degree include:

- They are looking for a second chapter in their career,
- They want to remain competitive in the workplace,
- They are taking on new challenges and learning new things
- They are achieving a long-held goal (Quinn, 2018, para. 8-11)

Some colleges have a long history of providing high-quality online programs to working adults to ensure that the decision to return to school pays off. Many of these schools are developing new pathways to make this a viable option for even more people, including those over 50 (Quinn, 2018).

Retention in Online Learning

Sorensen and Donovan (2017) reported that online education has grown in popularity among students throughout the years. There has been a growth in the number of available online universities and additional online choices for students enrolled in traditional colleges (Rasmussen, 2018). Despite the popularity and growing demand for online programs, retention has been challenging (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Online universities are currently criticized for having lower retention rates than their more traditional institutions (National Student

Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014). Retention rates for online programs at traditional public and private colleges are 68.2 percent (public) and 72.9 percent (private) (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2014).

Colleges and universities that offer online programs must increase student retention efforts to maintain student enrollment (Fisher & Baird, 2005). Because of the rapid growth of distance learning programs, educators must rethink traditional pedagogical strategies and find ways to integrate curriculum, technology, community, and learning to support student motivation, self-regulation, and retention in virtual learning environments (Fisher & Baird, 2005). In most schools and institutions of higher learning, theory and practice must be integrated into online learning; otherwise, students will be unable to practice and learn from peers (Fisher & Baird, 2005). In businesses, the support structure is strong, and the pressure to implement ideas is built into the job description (Llopis, 2022). There is no guarantee that self-regulation will succeed; human factors such as inexperienced instructors, ignorance about online learning, and lack of online learning abilities all act as impediments (Fisher & Baird, 2005).

Barriers to Degree Completion

Adult learners face various obstacles that can jeopardize their success in higher education and are more likely to abandon postsecondary education without receiving a degree, according to the United States Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (2002). Before enrolling in postsecondary education, many adult learners encounter one or more of three obstacles (Cross, 1981). Cross (1981) identified three categories of barriers to successful enrollment for adult learners in higher education: (1) situational, (2) institutional, and (3) dispositional, citing the situational barrier that typically refers to time and money challenges as the most common barrier faced by adult learners. Cross (1981) further defined institutional

barriers as those practices that intentionally or unintentionally discourage adult learners from participating in educational activities. Cross (1981) categorized these into five specific types of institutional barriers: (1) scheduling problems (2) location or transportation challenges (3) lack of interesting, practical or relevant courses (4) procedural problems and time requirements, and (5) lack of information about programs and procedures (p. 6).

Lastly, Cross (1981) summarized all previously recognized barriers as factors affecting adult-student enrollment and achievement. Furthermore, research conducted by Chism et al. (1989) illustrated that students who are returning to college often face psychological issues such as self-consciousness and anxiety about their performance and may also be less confident in their ability to succeed while attending college.

General barriers. According to Schaffhauser (2020), it is unsurprising that college completion rates are low. Millions of students who begin college never complete it, particularly those from low-income families and those attending two-year community colleges (Dawson et al., 2020). More than 40% of first-time, full-time enrolled students in four-year institutions do not complete a bachelor's degree within six years, and more than two-thirds do not complete an associate's degree within three years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Barriers for online learners. Research by (Dawson et al., 2020) revealed the following regarding barriers faced by college students:

- Under-preparation. Students frequently do not take the courses that will prepare them for college success in high school, forcing them to take non-credit remedial or development coursework to compensate — setting them back from the start. Students may also lack the necessary study skills to take on college-level coursework.

- Institutional impediments Many students struggle to navigate systems like enrollment, financial aid, and other processes. For example, studies have revealed that students require assistance in understanding course and degree requirements or become sidetracked by failing to register for the appropriate courses on time.
- Personal non-academic roadblocks, health issues, financial difficulties, mental health struggles, child care challenges, transportation difficulties, and even disconnection from the college community can all be obstacles.
- College tuition. While the high cost of higher education is widely regarded as a deterrent, research is mixed. Some research stated that receiving grant aid increases the probability of student persistence and degree completion by two to three percentage points, while other studies have found that, at least at the community college level, the cost may have less of an impact on completion rates than one might expect (pp. 4-6).

Dawson et al. (2020) revealed that one of the most difficult challenges in addressing the college completion crisis is that the students who require the most assistance to complete their degrees frequently attend colleges with the fewest resources and support for them. There is evidence of a causal relationship between institutional resources and student outcomes (Dawson et al., 2020).

Barriers for adult learners. *Not Too Late for School*, a report endorsed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2012) maintained that "older adult learners may need additional education and training to deal with the multiple issues that surround their perception of their ability to complete college" (p. 2). Older adults may encounter obstacles that impede their progress when returning to school. The top two barriers are finding time for school due to other commitments such as family and work and finding money for school while

providing for themselves and their family (Mbilinyi, 2006). Another barrier for adult learners was the time commitment required to attend classes regularly and complete all degree requirements (Mbilinyi, 2006).

Adult cognitive development changes may impact older students' academic performance. Older students' prior academic and life-world experiences, metacognitive knowledge, and abilities may differ from traditional-age students, potentially creating barriers to success (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Because of their life experiences, older adults employ a variety of strategies. Older adults may have learned to devise workable solutions, which may impact their academic performance. Because of their own experience, older adults may be more likely to understand problems, but this does not always translate into many solutions (Haught & Wells, 2007).

Adults aged 50 to 60 believed that age was a more significant educational disadvantage than race, ethnicity, country of origin, or gender (American Council on Education, 2007). Older adults face health problems, caregiving for spouses and grandchildren, financial difficulties, substance abuse issues, and abuse or neglect (American Council on Education, 2007). On the one hand, these issues frequently create challenges and barriers to learning; on the other hand, these challenges may assist older students in discovering new ways to adapt and learn (Cercone, 2008). Older adult learners are diverse, have specific needs, and require assistance to avoid dropping out of classes (American Council on Education, 2007).

Online learning presents enormous challenges for older adult learners who have spent many years in traditional classrooms. In traditional classrooms, the teacher was regarded as the subject matter expert who disseminated knowledge. Today, college students are older, more diverse, and have varying readiness levels for online learning, which may pose challenges for older adult learners (Halsne & Gatta, 2002). Technology issues may also cause issues with older

adult students' readiness. Colleges and universities have implemented strategies to help students who are unprepared for online learning. These strategies assist students in developing skills necessary for success in the online environment (Park, 2007).

Overcoming Barriers to Degree Completion

Motivation. Adult learners are those over the age of 25 and account for 40% of college students, according to the American Council on Education (2019). Motivation is critical to an adult online learner's success. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation is the inspiration one feels when undertaking an activity because it is delightful and fulfilling. Extrinsic motivation is fueled by external influences such as the desire to avoid punishment or gain a reward, which increases motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). While some adult learners are graduate students who have completed their studies, many adult learners return to school after working in the workforce. These learners have a myriad of reasons to pursue a college education online, including the following:

Flexibility. Most online courses are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days per year. On the other hand, adult learners can typically study around their work schedules from anywhere. Because adult learners frequently have to balance education and other commitments, program flexibility is critical. Adult learners can finish tasks in chunks or in between other obligations. Often, they can earn a degree online at their leisure. They can enroll in one or more courses per semester or in a shorter-term online program that allows them to concentrate on one course at a time. Many prospective online students already have credits toward a bachelor's degree so programs may provide transfer credits or credit for life or job experience. Some programs allow students to test out of specific courses (Stoltz-Loike, 2017).

Numerous adult learners are achieving their goals due to the rise of online educational alternatives. Adults who work full-time, have children, and have other responsibilities previously could not consider returning to school. Occasionally, distance impedes. For example, a farmer supporting his family in a remote area was once unable to drive to city night classes due to a too-long commute. The flexibility of online education attracts many adult learners who would not have had access to school otherwise.

Career Advancement. A person's education level determines how much money the person can make. According to the United States Census Bureau (2021), a high school graduate may earn approximately \$1 million during a lifetime, whereas a bachelor's degree holder may make twice that amount. The income earning potential increases as the individual gains more education. Adults returning to school have a strong financial incentive to do so.

Adult learners who aspire to grow in their existing careers find they have been promoted to the highest level they could ever reach without extra schooling. While some students return to school for bachelor's degrees or graduate study, others concentrate on career-specific classes. Adult learners benefit from schools that focus on corporate and professional development (Hanly, 2020).

Certain adult learners are on the verge of making a career move. While the circumstances surrounding such a decision are as different as the number of students involved, adult learners believe they are better suited to pursuing a vocation that requires a college education rather than looking for high school graduates' jobs (Hanly, 2020). While many believe they were not mature enough for college when he finished high school, he had matured and was prepared to commit himself to a new profession (Hanly, 2020).

Institutional Support. The role of professors and instructional designers in adult learners' success in using technology is paramount. Goulão (2012) suggests that adult learners benefit from the time and space flexibility that online learning provides, allowing for better management of their educational needs. One of the instructor's most critical roles in these learning systems is mediator or facilitator. The professor's objective should be to give suitable educational support for students' constructive learning—in an online education system that emphasizes the concept of the learner as a constructor of knowledge, self-regulation and self-efficacy take on added significance (Goulão, 2012).

Hart (2018) revealed that when faculty members and instructional designers are tasked with developing higher education courses for the online learning format, they are frequently assigned to collaborate as a course development team. Regarding instructional design, faculty members may be completely unfamiliar with the topic, let alone the useful information instructional designers may offer to a course creation effort. As a result, they may be unaware that the guidance and assistance instructional designers may provide can assist faculty members in taking their courses to the next level. Instructional designers have specialized knowledge of learning theories and instructional design models, which are essential for increasing the quality of instruction in online higher education courses. They are also known as instructional technologists. The effect of failing to use such specific expertise can be low-level courses in which students do not succeed. In order to improve the quality of online higher education courses, it is critical for persons in academia to learn to realize the critical role that instructional designers play (p. 74).

According to the University of Arizona Global Campus (2021), when taking on the role of a college student, some adult learners may experience real or perceived anxiety. These

concerns are understandable, so faculty must work hard to provide students with the consideration, care, and support they require to succeed. Faculty must advise adult learners and support them in understanding the value of time management and the necessity of maintaining a healthy work-life balance while also fulfilling their various responsibilities (University of Arizona Global Campus, 2021). Earning a college education is time-consuming, and educators must guide and coach adult learners. Students can see and understand more as they gain experience and apply inductive reasoning. Confidence and comfort levels then begin to rise at this point and the adult learner may then feel better able to continue their learning journey. Being a college student is a different experience and is a role that adult students must continue to manage as they progress along the learning continuum (Panacci, 2015).

An instructional designer assists faculty members in developing an online course. The main task of the instructional designer is to make online course production easier for faculty while also assisting in making knowledge acquisition more efficient, effective, and appealing for students, among other things (Stimpson, 2019). Experiences are significant because it is necessary to build on the adult learners' prior knowledge for it to apply to the lesson subjects discussed (O'Neill, 2022). Rather than asking general questions, instructional designers focus on framing questions that inspire students to reflect on specific past experiences that they may utilize better to comprehend the current lesson (Zaccarini, 2021).

Academic Achievement. The number of college graduates over the age of 50 is growing, as is their share of the global population (Clark & Esters, 2018). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), over 500,000 students over the age of 50 enrolled in degree-granting institutions. Clark and Esters (2018) reported that scientific evidence disproves ill-conceived notions that older students might be burdened with cognitive disadvantages.

Clark and Esters (2018) further revealed that a neuroscientist at the University of California, Irvine stated that people reach their peak cognitive abilities in their sixties, which is the ideal time to balance executive functions with intellectual techniques. Schaie and Willis (2010) followed the cognitive skills of thousands of adults over 50 and discovered that middle-aged adults outperformed young adults academically.

Furthermore, Salthouse (2019) completed a study examining the impact of age-related cognitive declines and discovered no evidence that cognitive ability declines with age. Self-directed learning is vital to success in an online learning environment (Merriam, 2007). Research shows that many students do not have self-directed learning skills when starting online classes. They need to learn these skills to be successful academically (Merriam, 2007).

The Gap in the Literature

In reviewing the history of online learning, along with the history of adult education and retention in online learning, there has not been much research conducted on the older adult learner in the 45 and older age range and technology. There is a substantial amount of research on online learning. Previous research has looked at motivation, learner participation, and how learner participation patterns affect academic achievement in an online setting (Cercone, 2008; Coombs-Richardson, 2007; Park, 2007; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). Previous studies looked at both younger (18 to 25 year old) and older (25 to 50 year old) students' readiness for self-directed learning (Ke & Xie, 2009).

Notwithstanding the previous research relative to older adult learners, there is a gap in the literature. Despite technological challenges, no previous research has investigated why older adult learners (45 and older) choose and persist in online degree programs and how they address and overcome technology barriers. This case study will seek to comprehend the

difficulties encountered by older adult learners, as well as how self-directed online learning influenced their success in the online environment (American Council of Education, 2007; Cercone, 2008; Haught & Wells, 2007; Janakiraman et al., 2018; Ting, 2007).

USG's eMajor Program

History of the Program

Since 2012, eMajor has provided flexible, online degree programs through a network of University System of Georgia campuses (USG eMajor, 2021). eMajor's mission is to provide high-quality, creative, and in-demand programs via conventional schools. Each course is developed and maintained by dedicated professors and instructional design professionals to ensure that it meets the highest quality, design, and accessibility standards and is taught by University System of Georgia instructors (USG eMajor, 2022). A defining feature of eMajor is the inclusion of prior learning evaluations in numerous programs, which significantly reduces the time required to get a degree (USG eMajor, 2021). eMajor offers entirely online degrees in collaborative and standalone environments. The program discusses collaborative program offerings for eMajor exclusively. Students enrolled in single-institution eMajor programs come from only one affiliate university, and instructors are recruited only from that affiliation. Collaborative eMajor courses are offered in collaboration with a variety of affiliated schools. Courses may involve students from any of the associate universities, and instructors are selected from across the network (USG eMajor, 2022).

Target Population

The mission of USG eCampus, the umbrella program of eMajor and a service unit of the University System of Georgia, is to provide access to high-quality and affordable online courses and degrees that address the workforce needs of Georgia and beyond. USG eCampus supports

eMajor programs available through Georgia's public colleges and universities and is ideal for traditional students, working professionals, military members, and anyone looking to further their education to gain a competitive advantage in today's job market (USG eMajor, 2022). USG eCampus uses resources to envision, build, and support affordable, high-quality higher education pathways that benefit Georgia's economic, cultural, and social interests (USG eCampus, 2022). USG eCampus' goal is for Georgia to be the most educated state in the country, with graduates applying their knowledge and talents to make the state the most desirable place to live (USG eCampus, 2022).

Program Recruitment

Members of the eMajor collaborative and single-institution partnership teams continue to cultivate relationships with Educational Services Personnel from military bases across the state and individual campus Adult Learner Concierge Admissions Representatives and Veterans Educational Services Officers (USG eMajor, 2022). A representative from the eCampus partnership team attends military education events across the state, and specific eMajor affiliate promotional events are supported by eCampus when requested. To raise awareness of the programs available to prospective and current University System of Georgia students, independent institutional adult and military preview days, college fairs, and career fairs are planned. Specific eMajor academic programs are listed on statewide initiative websites and portals, including Go Back Move Ahead and Georgia ONmyLINE (USG eMajor, 2022). Requests for information made via the eMajor website are processed and addressed, eventually directing interested candidates to an affiliate institution point of contact, academic program representative, or eMajor liaison.

USG eCampus marketing offerings include printed materials, print, digital, and outdoor advertising, and promotional goods. Custom items, such as print materials, business cards, posters, and pop-up banners, can be developed upon request. eMajor advertising efforts are run on behalf of all associate institutions during peak recruitment. On the Affiliate Knowledge Base website, digital versions of all existing collateral pieces and approved logos are accessible for download (USG eMajor, 2022). Additionally, each affiliate receives printed materials for use on campus and in recruitment events.

Several eMajor social media pages were merged over the last year as part of the transition to the all-inclusive USG eCampus brand. Affiliate relationships are a large part of showcasing the legitimacy of the programs on social media, so USG eCampus continually seek relevant, shareable content from these pages. The program also shares helpful tips for students, success stories, and faculty highlights.

Lastly, residents 62 and older in Georgia can enroll in classes at any of the state's 31 colleges and universities without paying tuition; however, some minimal fees may apply (Georgia Board of Regents, 2021). Because the benefit is not extensively advertised, few seniors are aware of it, although most institutions will have information about the policy on their websites. Students aged 62 and up can also choose between taking courses for credit or auditing, which involves sitting in on a class but not having to take exams or receiving a mark. Many people, however, choose to take the credit that will count toward a degree (Cauley, 2021).

Program Challenges

Computers and the internet are more known to older adult learners, who fall into baby boomers' generational category than the previous generation. Pew Internet and American Life Project concluded that 22% of Americans aged 65 and up use the internet, up from 15% in 2000,

compared to 58 percent of those aged 56 to 64. (Fox, 2004). As the number of people aged 56 to 64 continues to age, a more considerable percentage of the older adult population will engage in online activities. Many of the initial concerns with older adult learners, such as the requirement to learn the fundamentals of computers, will be resolved. On the other hand, education providers must develop creative ways to reach out to less technical-savvy individuals, such as impoverished and under-educated older adult learners. Otherwise, these learners will continue to be marginalized in society (Timmermann, 1998).

USG eCampus offers the following "Five Success Tips for Online Adult Learners" to assist with the challenge of conquering online courses:

1. Login before the first day of class to ensure the student's credentials work.
2. Create a study schedule that fits into the student's life.
3. Ask questions when the student does not understand. All USG eCampus-supported courses are taught by faculty from SACSCOC accredited schools across the state. eCampus instructors are also a great resource to help direct the student to free tutoring and other support services.
4. Embrace technology. The student is encouraged to make use of various applications and tools there that can be leveraged for not just studying, but keeping the student organized.
5. The student is reminded to believe in themselves. The student is also reminded to seek assistance if needed. (USG eCampus LinkedIn, 2022).

Pathways to Faster Degree Completion

eMajor programs employ cutting-edge ways to expedite the completion of degrees. These include the program's structure, enrollment, student support, and built-in opportunities for

transfer credit and credit for past learning (USG eMajor, 2022). Collaborative programs are taught by instructors from multiple University System of Georgia institutions and include students from multiple institutions. Degrees offered in a single institution format are taught by instructors from a single institution and are only available to students from that institution (USG eMajor, 2022).

Program Structure

The format of the eMajor Collaborative Program encourages completion by adopting eight-week accelerated courses that allow students to meet prerequisites and stack courses during any given term. Additionally, courses have a common course shell and syllabus, with content organized into modules. This provides a consistent format for students, reducing the time required to master course navigation. Additionally, eMajor Single Institution Programs may offer expedited courses (USG eMajor, 2022).

Enrollment and Student Support

Enrollment and student support services are also accessible to prospective and existing students enrolled in an eMajor course. High-touch, personalized enrollment support ensures that new and returning students have the resources and help they need to successfully navigate the admissions and enrollment process, regardless of the institution or program they choose.

Unofficial transcript reviews are available to assist students in determining how prior credit fits into a new degree. When students enroll in and attend eMajor courses, they will have access to a variety of resources, including a dedicated Student Support Team that will give coaching and guidance throughout the semester (USG eMajor Factbook, 2021).

Built-in Room for Transfer Credit.

The eMajor Collaborative Programs allow for transfer credit and also accept bulk credit for certain programs through articulation agreements with other University System of Georgia and Technical College System of Georgia schools (USG eMajor Factbook, 2021). The Organizational Leadership program, in particular, features an unarticulated track that might help undecided or change-of-major students accelerate their degree completion.

Credit for Prior Learning

Students can gain credit for earlier learning through eMajor Collaborative programs by showing learning that occurred outside of a classroom setting. Within Organizational Leadership bachelor degree programs, numerous popular evaluation methods are used, including a challenge test, a portfolio, or a blend of the two. Credit for past learning may also be offered through eMajor single institution programs (USG eMajor Factbook, 2021).

Program Success

The USG eMajor Factbook (2021) reported that the Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership program focuses on organizational leadership practices, theories, issues, parameters, and specific ramifications. The program is ideal for those who want to advance to management positions within a business or organization. Within the program, concentrations are available to allow for specialization in specific industries. Regarding the overall success of the program, Organizational Leadership's total enrollment growth from fiscal year 2019 to fiscal year 2020 was 24.44% for a total of 2,704 students (USG eMajor Factbook, 2021, p. 54). During 2020, 12.43% or 130 students were between the ages of 46 and 55, 2.29% or 24 students were 56 to 65 years of age and 11 students or 1.05% were over the age of 65

(USG Factbook, 2021) and 86.39% of the students enrolled during 2020 academic year, which consisted of spring, summer and fall terms, completed their courses.

Other eCampus Program Models

There are a number of comparable eCampus program models throughout the United States. Five programs were examined in order to determine how services offered to adult learners were similar to or different from USG eCampus. They include Bowling Green State University, University of Alabama, Oregon State University, Western Governor's University and Tennessee eCampus.

Bowling Green State University eCampus Program

Bowling Green State University has accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) to offer full degree programs online and has proven to be committed to quality by being selected by the Ohio Board of Regents as a "Host Center of Excellence for E-learning" as well as having several online programs nationally ranked by U.S. News and World Report. At the heart of Bowling Green State University are 861 full-time faculty members who devote their energies to teaching, research, and working closely with students. Many are national and international experts in their field; others are authors; still others have won awards for both teaching and research. The online program offers one online associates degree, four online bachelor's degrees, fourteen master's degrees, eleven online certifications and five online endorsements. Bowling Green State University lists the following as advantages of their online program:

- Access to the same world-class professors as their on-campus students.
- Connect with the career center to expand the student's opportunities.
- Reminds students that they may continue their employment while attending school.
- Students may attend class from anywhere in world.

- Flexible schedules that work around life.
- Online courses allow students to spend more time with their family and friends.

Online programs using the eCampus platform run 7-week classes and provide concierge services for their students such as access a one-stop-shop for all eCampus student questions, and personalized course registration services. (BGSU, 2022).

Bowling Green State University has a cutting-edge online learning environment. Students log into Bowling Green State University's Learning Management System to access your online courses. The Learning Management System contains all the information, assignments, and instructor and peer interactions necessary to complete your course. Online courses utilize the same learning outcomes as face to face courses so the online student will be learning the same information as their on-campus peers. Instructors use a variety of media in online courses including video, text, assessments, projects and discussion forums.

Bowling Green State University online programs have the same learning outcomes as our face to face programs and are taught by the same faculty. Because of this, Bowling Green State University's online programs come with the same rigor, expectations, and reputation as on-campus programs, which is why you earn the same degree as the online student's on-campus peers after completing the degree requirements. According to the Bowling Green State University eCampus website, the program has experienced 373% growth in four years, 37% of undergraduate online learners are active military or veterans and students come from 49 different states. (BGSU, 2022). Bowling Green State University eCampus also received 2017 recognition from Military Times as the "Best for Vets Colleges", #1 Accounting program in Ohio by Business Week, and accreditations by Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

(AABCS), The Association of Technology, Management, and Applied Engineering and National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (BGSU, 2022).

Oregon State University eCampus Program

In order to provide people all around the world with access to a transformative education, Oregon State eCampus combines 21st century innovation with 150+ years of institutional quality, according to the Oregon State University website (2022). The institution claims that it is motivated to support its online students:

- Make an impact in their communities and beyond
- Feel supported along every step of their journey
- Build connections with OSU's world-class faculty
- Enter the workforce with the skills they need to succeed

A national leader in online education, Oregon State University Ecampus is widely considered one of America's best providers of online education. In 2022, Oregon State's online bachelor's programs were ranked No. 5 in the nation by U.S. News & World Report, making it Ecampus' eighth straight year in the top 10.

According to Hansen (2021), Oregon State University's Ecampus has a proud history of extending the bounds of what is practical in higher education. Their record of accomplishments spans decades and may be measured over more than 110 subject areas. The gold standard for quality in online education is set by Oregon State Ecampus. All 1,600 of the university's online courses were created organically, which is how Oregon State sets itself apart. Students enroll in online courses that are built on the subject matter expertise of faculty, the ability of instructional designers to craft highly engaging learning experiences, and the technological innovations produced by multimedia developers (McDonald, 2018). As a result, every Oregon State Ecampus

class is designed and redesigned through extensive collaborations between Oregon State faculty members and Ecampus staff. Ecampus students benefit from having this combination of expertise in place and working together.

The University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa

The University of Alabama (2022) strives to provide degree programs and individual courses in every state. The University of Alabama offers more than seventy bachelor's, master's, specialist, and doctorate degree programs in online and hybrid formats, allowing students to advance their education while advancing their careers. Alabama works through the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreement (NC-SARA) where applicable or directly with states to obtain necessary permits. Alabama is a member of NC-SARA, and the University is an NC-SARA-approved institution (National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, 2022). The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (NC-SARA) is a private nonprofit organization [501(c)(3)] that aids in increasing students' access to educational opportunities and making sure that distance education programs are regulated in a way that is more effective, efficient, and consistent (National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, 2022). Higher education stakeholders, including state regulators and education leaders, accreditors, the U.S. Department of Education, and institutions, banded together in 2013 to establish the State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements (SARA), which streamline regulations for distance education programs, in response to the rising demand for distance learning opportunities (National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements, 2022).

Furthermore, the University of Alabama (2022) offers the following academic resources to their students: 1) academic calendar, 2) online student success, 3) academic coaching and skill

building, 4) tutoring, including online, 5) student success center, 6) disability services, 7) library services, 8) writing center, 9) career center, and 10) other services related to enrollment services.

Western Governor's University

Western Governors' University (WGU) was conceived at a meeting of the Western Governors' Association as a response to a growing need for a college-educated workforce that was not being adequately fulfilled by traditional higher education. These governors, coupled with the early and enthusiastic leadership of academic and industrial innovators, laid the groundwork for WGU's current success.

WGU is an online university dedicated to making higher education accessible for as many people as possible. The mission of Western Governors University is to increase access and opportunity for all students, regardless of their origin, goals, or circumstances in life. The WGU method emphasizes delivering good outcomes for its approximately 250,000 graduates. The curriculum focused on the needs of the modern workforce, which is why WGU graduates have a 98 percent employer satisfaction rate and an average income rise of over \$18,000 within two years of graduation (Western Governor's University, 2022). Western Governor's University offers four online degree paths consisting of teaching, business, information technology and health and nursing.

Tennessee eCampus Initiative

According to the state of Tennessee eCampus (2022), the College System of Tennessee is governed by the Tennessee Board of Regents and consists of 40 institutions with a combined annual enrollment of over 140,000 students, making it one of the nation's largest public higher education systems. The System's thirteen community colleges and 27 Colleges of Applied Technology provide instruction in more than 175 teaching locations throughout the state. The

institutions that make up the Tennessee eCampus network provide online students with the same level of support that they do for on-campus students. A lot of the services are web-enabled for convenience and better access.

Tennessee eCampus (2022) further reports Students who require online courses to complete their degrees or maintain full- or part-time status can bridge schedule gaps through the Tennessee eCampus partnership. Tennessee's thirteen community colleges and three regionally managed public universities all participate in course delivery through the online partnership, which began in the autumn of 2001.

Tennessee eCampus (2022) offers over 450 online courses, including many fundamental General Education courses that are transportable between partner schools. Tennessee eCampus also offers many of the General Education and Major Field Core courses required for A.A.S. degree fulfillment at our System's community institutions. The courses are rigorously planned and academically equivalent to those taught on traditional college campuses. To assist students in excelling in an online learning environment, a range of student support tools are provided, including an online bookshop, 24/7 technical assistance, tutoring, test proctoring, and disability services. Tennessee eCampus courses are the same as those available on physical campus sites. On transcripts or diplomas, no distinction is made between online and in-person delivery. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools has regionally recognized all participating institutions. The Tennessee eCampus collaboration supports the "Drive to 55" campaign, which aims to provide more Tennesseans with a degree or certificate by 2025 (Tennessee eCampus, 2022).

Like the University System of Georgia, there are several states that offer free tuition for residents who are considered senior citizens. Many residents qualify at the age of 55. According

to Wilfong (2022) the following states are included in this educational benefit to their residents: Wisconsin, Virginia, Texas, Oregon, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Maryland, Kansas, Illinois, Florida, Delaware, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, California, South Carolina and Colorado.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a collection of beliefs about oneself that determines how successfully one can carry out a plan of action in hypothetical situations (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to succeed in a specific circumstance. Dinther et al. (2011) investigated the relationship between education and self-efficacy. The research concluded that self-efficacy is related to various factors, including the tactics individuals employ, the objectives they set for themselves, and their academic successes. In other words, increased self-efficacy is associated with what most people worldwide perceive to be healthy student life behaviors. This philosophy indicates that persons with higher degrees of self-efficacy may perform better academically and be more organized (Lopez-Garrido, 2020).

In research conducted by the AMG Higher Education Marketing (2021), self-efficacy is the belief that students have in their own ability to achieve or perform well in a particular area of study. Adult students frequently do not have complete confidence in their ability to study. As a result, assisting students in setting appropriate learning objectives and reframing their views about their skills helps students feel more in control of their learning experiences. It is critical to provide adult learners with thoughtful, constructive feedback to avoid discouraging them. Allowing students to make decisions about how and when they complete assignments while still offering instructor support would enhance autonomy in the classroom. Increased persistence

rates are naturally associated with students who enjoy and experience a feeling of accomplishment in their educational endeavors (AMG Higher Education Marketing, 2021).

Constructivist Educational Paradigm

Constructivism is a philosophy of education and learning predicated on the idea that cognition learning results from "mental construction" (Bada, & Olusegun, 2015, p. 66), and students acquire knowledge by associating new information with previously acquired knowledge. Constructivists believe that the context in which a concept is presented and the student's ideas and attitudes influence learning. Constructivism, furthermore, is a psychological theory of learning that explains how humans gain knowledge and learn. As a result, it is directly applicable to education (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

According to Driscoll (2000), the constructivist theory asserts that knowledge can only exist within the human mind and does not have to correspond to any real-world reality. Learners will constantly attempt to construct their mental model of the natural world based on their perceptions. Learners will continuously update their mental models to reflect new information as they perceive each unique experience and will thus construct their interpretation of reality. Moreover, constructivism is a concept about how people learn based on observation and scientific investigation. It states that individuals develop their understanding and knowledge of the universe through their interactions with objects and their reflections on those interactions (Bereiter, 1994)

According to this view, humans derive knowledge and meaning from their experiences. Constructivism is not a distinct educational philosophy. Piaget's constructivist theory of learning has profoundly influenced educational theories and practices and is a central theme in several education reform groups. The scientific evidence for constructivist teaching strategies has been

inconsistent, with some studies supporting them and others refuting them (Bada & Olusegun, 2015).

Methodology Overview

Qualitative Methodology

EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and ProQuest were used to conduct searches for peer-reviewed journal articles and dissertations. All searches were limited to English-language journal publications. Between August 2019 and March 2022, database searches were conducted. In March 2022, supplemental searches were conducted. There are various research methods to collect data in qualitative research (Creswell, 2003; 2007). Qualitative research is a type of scientific research consisting of an investigation that:

- seeks answers to a question
- systematically uses a predefined set of procedures to answer the question
- collects evidence
- produces findings that were not determined in advance
- produces findings that are applicable beyond the immediate boundaries of the study (Mack et al., 2005, p.1).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), qualitative research is a technique that looks at how individuals and groups understand their lived experiences. Additionally, qualitative research seeks to understand a given research problem or topic from the local population's perspective (Mack et al., 2005). Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about particular populations' values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts (Mack et al., 2005). Qualitative research methodologies take five different approaches to convey the participants' stories. In order to get a clear image of the research, each of the methods used:

narrative, ethnography-grounded theory, and case study strive to do so. Identifying the issue, gathering data, analyzing the data, and reaching conclusions are critical aspects of any technique (Creswell, 2007). An adult learner's success in an online learning environment will be examined using a case study design in this study.

Case Study Design

Numerous researchers have examined adult learners' features in college classrooms, providing strong but not unequivocal support for the assumptions behind the adult learning and theoretical development frameworks discussed above (Ross-Gordon, 2003). Ross-Gordon (2003) researched reviews that focused on adult learners in the classroom. Numerous studies demonstrated adult students' preferences for active learning strategies that promote cognitive growth and transformational learning and their desires for immediate application of knowledge and opportunities for self-direction (Ross-Gordon, 2003). However, this same body of research indicates that adults frequently lack confidence upon readmission to college and prefer highly structured learning experiences that provide a clear roadmap of teacher expectations. According to this body of research, adult learners desire flexibility and structure. Additionally, they demonstrate various learning styles and preferences impacted by their prior experiences with higher education and social and cultural backgrounds and should not be viewed as a homogenous group (Smart et al., 2006). This is especially true when evaluating subpopulations of adult learners who have not been consistently included in the substantial body of research on adult learners, such as students of color (Ross-Gordon 2005), veterans (Rumann & Hamrick 2010), and individuals with impairments (Rocco, 2001).

Summary

This qualitative study aimed to investigate online education's challenges and motivating factors from the perspective of older adult learners. There is a lack of research regarding the older adult learner in online degree programs. Despite extensive research on the topic of online learning, few studies focusing on the perspective of older adults who are learners have been published. Adult learners appear to be a growing student population. Higher education institutions are increasingly attempting to develop programs and services responsive to adults' life and learning preferences (Worth & Stephens, 2021). This effort has pushed college faculty and administrators to think outside the box when teaching and delivering educational programs. Numerous institutions and program units have a long history of adapting to adult learners' needs more recently than others (Morris, 2020). Nonetheless, current programs' experiences with various types of online learning, prior learning assessment, and intensive courses can provide a wealth of information.

Before the COVID-19 epidemic, the National Center for Education Statistics expected higher education enrollment to expand soon (Hussar & Bailey, 2019). On the other hand, higher education enrollment has decreased across the board, except for for-profit universities and online public graduate programs (Hall, 2021). These inconsistencies may result from aggressive student recruitment methods, the economic crisis, or a combination (Baylor, 2020). Whatever the reason, it appears that for-profit schools, despite their problems, are now providing students with an educational product that will last (Baylor, 2020). Whether or not these schools live up to their promises, understanding how students view their choices and experiences may help the public and private sectors improve their service to students, and lawmakers safeguard current and potential students more effectively (United States Department of Education, 2009). When

creating supportive learning environments for adult learners, faculty members can contribute significantly as change agents by incorporating theory and research about adult learners into their classrooms and advocating for implementing adult-oriented programs and services on their campuses (Blair, 2010). For adult learners to have a good undergraduate experience, the design and implementation of these programs are crucial.

Chapter III: Methodology

This current qualitative research study aims to investigate the perspectives of adult learners enrolled in a completely online degree program. Busetto et al. (2020) found that qualitative methods, such as constructivism or interpretivism, represent a different underlying research paradigm than quantitative methods, such as positivism. Van der Walt (2020) revealed that constructivism, as a scholarly method or approach to a problem, assumes that reality and human behavior are characterized by continuous fluctuations, adjustments, and transformations occurring concurrently at multiple sites, and that they provide a subtle depiction of how facts emerge and truths are shaped. Whereas understanding the individual and their interpretation of the world around them is prioritized. As a result, the interpretivist paradigm's central assumption is that reality is socially produced (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Chapter Three highlighted the qualitative process applied to comprehending the motivating factors and needs that impact older adult learners' decisions to enroll and remain in the collaborative University System of Georgia eMajor program, Organizational Leadership. Motivation is critical to an adult online learner's success. Motivation is key to successful learning because it can stimulate the adult learner's need to learn (Aljohani & Alajlan, 2018). Boshier (1991) and Knowles et al. (2012) found that adults are motivated to learn by internal and external factors. Some adults are motivated by external factors (the promise of better jobs, promotions, and higher salaries), and others utilize internal factors (the desire for increased job satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life) to engage in their learning. Knowles et al. (2012) revealed that “the most potent motivators are internal pressures” (p. 67).

This chapter also described the research design and techniques and the research environment and context in which the data were obtained. In addition, the recruitment and

selection strategies utilized to identify the older adult learners for the case study was described, followed by the data collection and analysis procedures. A summary of the researcher's role and the research techniques used to ensure the data's credibility was also provided in this chapter.

This research aimed better to understand the online experiences of older adult learners. For a variety of reasons, older students are deciding to return to college. Older adult learners were raised in an instructor-led environment where the instructor provided knowledge, and the student did what was expected (Feldman et al., 2021). With the emergence of distance learning, older adults are enrolling in online courses with outdated skills that may not be suitable for the online environment (Kara et al., 2019).

According to Knowles' (1990) adult learning theory of andragogy, older adult learners have acquired skills through life experiences. The skills they learned have helped them succeed in life, but not necessarily in online learning (Knowles et al., 2012). Older adult learners require experiences that are relevant to their life experiences (Knowles, 1990). There is evidence that these older adult learners may struggle with online learning due to physical limitations such as hearing loss, poor vision, or difficulty with the technical skills required for online learning (Ke & Xie, 2009). This research will help higher education administrators and professionals understand how older adult learners learn in online environments and whether their life experiences help or hinder the older adult learner in this setting.

Research Design

A case study presents an outstanding opportunity to get profound insight into a case. This research design enables the researcher to collect data from a variety of sources and integrate them to bring light on the subject (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Klenke et al. (2015) revealed that “fundamentally, qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks an in-depth

understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting or context” (p.6). This current qualitative research case study will examine older adult learners' experiences to understand better their needs and motivation in their online degree program, Organizational Leadership.

According to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when:

(a) the purpose of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study; (c) the researcher wants to cover contextual conditions because it is believed to be relevant to the phenomenon under study, or (d) the phenomenon and context boundaries are unclear (p. 545).

Yin's (2003) characteristics are related to this case study due to the need to uncover how older adult learners perceive the use of technology in higher education. The learner seeks to increase their academic accomplishment, learning comprehension, and perception of how the use of technology will improve their course tasks. These aspects were significant because motivation and perception are critical components of the learning process since they determine how individuals interpret their experiences.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this current qualitative case study and were created to elicit the participants' shared experiences:

- RQ1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?
- RQ2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?

A qualitative case study research design was implemented to address the research questions. This case study's main goal was to comprehend adult online learners' experiences and

the influences of academic motivation on their decision to complete degree programs. Semi-structured interviews will be used to understand the opinions of the motivational elements that contributed to the success of these older adult online learners. According to Picciano (2004), a qualitative methodology offers a descriptive analysis and emphasizes a specific demographic pattern that could be inferred. According to Brantlinger et al. (2005), qualitative research focuses on the participants' interpretations of a particular occurrence. Creswell (2007) revealed that case study research is

an approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, interviews, audiovisual material, and documents and reports) and report a case description and case-based (p. 73).

Moreover, both Creswell (2009) and Merriam (1998) contend that case study analysis can use any data collection method. The current qualitative case study research method will examine the experiences of twelve older adult learners to understand better their needs and motivation in their online degree program. For data collection in this case study research, in-depth interviews will be utilized (Creswell, 2007). The researcher will be able to uncover the participants' experiences through in-depth interviews. Alternative methodologies may not give the researcher sufficient knowledge of these shared life experiences. The purpose of this study is to find new significance in the experiences of older students to aid administrators, teachers, and support staff in meeting the requirements of older adult learners (Creswell, 2007, pp. 60-61).

In-depth semi-structured interviews yield compelling narratives because they transform questions about a specific topic into invitations to tell a story (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997). This

interview style is viewed as 'talking' because talking is a natural activity (Griffiee, 2005).

DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) discovered that semi-structured interviews are an effective data collection strategy because the researcher aims to: (1) collect qualitative, open-ended data; (2) investigate participant thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about a particular topic; and (3) delve deeply into personal and, at times, sensitive problems.

Role of the Researcher

Since 2018, the primary researcher has served as the online academic advisor for USG eCampus and will be responsible for data collection, interpretation, analysis, and dissemination. Before beginning any data collection, the researcher will consider her role as the program's sole academic advisor and critically evaluate how her ideas or viewpoints may impact or impede the study. Because the researcher has personal or professional ties to the participants as their assigned academic advisor, there is an established level of trust with the researcher. Moreover, because the participants are in tune with their educational goals and progress, they can speak candidly and confidently about their experiences. The researcher aimed to create an atmosphere via the Zoom virtual conferencing tool that would allow participants to discuss their experiences with online learning openly.

The researcher is an online, older adult learner like the participants. However, this perspective as both an academic advisor and a student may be challenging. The researcher may have preconceived notions about the participants' experiences, which may hinder her ability to correctly comprehend the unique experiences of older students within online learning. The relationship between the researcher and the participant affects the data's quality in many respects. Wa-Mbaleka et al. (2019) found that the closer researchers are to their subjects, the more factual and detailed the data obtained. In this case, it will be necessary for the researcher to set aside any

possible biases to accurately capture and analyze the participants' experiences and beliefs and rely on the co-principal investigator and methodologist to maintain objectivity and avoid bias with the qualitative data analysis.

Participants

Prior to participant recruitment, the researcher will obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the researcher's home institution (Appendix A). Approval from partner institutions was unnecessary because all participants were adults, and institutional data were not used for this study. Once IRB approval is granted, the researcher will begin participant recruitment.

The researcher will use a purposeful sampling strategy to identify participants for this study. Purposeful sampling is frequently employed in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases to maximize the use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling entails identifying and choosing individuals or organizations with specialized expertise or experience about a topic of interest. Sampling with intent emphasizes selecting information from examples by which the researcher can learn a great deal. A sampling explains the answers to questions crucial to the research's objective (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is a non-random sampling strategy that employs a particular set of criteria or objectives to pick a sample (Palinkas et al., 2015). In some cases, the researcher may utilize one or more procedures or criteria to select the sample (Palinkas et al., 2015).

For this study, the researcher identified possible participants using the student information system Banner by Ellucian and the University System of Georgia's student information system, the Intra-Georgia Registration Sharing System. As of fall 2022, 58 older adult learners fit the sample age criteria for this study (USG eCampus, 2022). Based on the

researcher's observations, those aged 45 and older require the most support with the online degree program. Consequently, the study will include approximately 12 adult learners aged 45 and older who are enrolled at one of the three partner institutions of the USG eMajor collaborative programs. Creswell (2014) states that a heterogeneous group consists of approximately 10 to 15 individuals. The researcher will recruit a minimum of twelve participants for this case study and include the number necessary to achieve saturation. Hennink and Kaiser (2019) describe saturation as a fundamental qualitative research principle that determines when there is sufficient data from a study to establish a solid and valid understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Once the sampling has been identified, each potential participant will receive a preliminary participation request via email (Appendix B) and a consent form (Appendix C) if they agree to participate in the study. The participants will have one week to decide if they will participate in the study. If there is a minimal response, a reminder follow-up email will be forwarded to those participants who have not responded (Appendix D). The goal is to recruit at least twelve participants. Interviews were scheduled as agreements were made, and consent forms were signed and returned via email. The only set criteria for study participation are willingness and time commitment.

Instrumentation

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as the instrument to conduct the research. Interviewing is the most popular method of gathering data for educational qualitative studies, and semi-structured interviews are widely used in social sciences, according to Merriam (2009). Busetto et al. (2020) found that

qualitative interviews are informal discussions with a purpose. Open-ended questions and an interview guide (or topic guide/list) that identifies basic areas of interest, which may include follow-up questions, characterize semi-structured interviews. Themes for the interview guide can be chosen from the literature, past research, document study, or observations. The topic list is often revised and refined as the interviewer learns more about the field. Qualitative interviews are interactive, allowing researchers to address unanticipated concerns. Although interviews can be oral or videotaped, the researcher may find it necessary to take written notes (p. 3).

Pollock (2019) stated that in a structured interview, the questions are planned with a particular set of questions. In contrast, a semi-structured interview allows the researcher to ask only a few predetermined questions while the remainder of the questions are not planned.

The semi-structured interviews with the participants consisted of 19 open-ended questions (Appendix E). The researcher developed the questions based on the desire to explore the motivating factors and needs of older adult learners in one USG eMajor collaborative program and understands that all questions may not be used in each interview. The interview questions also focused on the older adult learners' decisions to enroll and persist in the online degree program regardless of experiencing technological challenges.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016), the instrument's questions must align with the research questions. To establish a relationship to the research questions, an alignment chart consisting of the case study title, problem and purpose statements, research questions, data collection instrument, and correlation to the specific question or prompt from the data collection tool that answers each research question is displayed below (see Table 4).

Table 4

Alignment Chart

Title of Dissertation: A Case Study Exploring the Motivating Factors and Needs that Influence Older Adult Learners' Decisions to Enroll and Persist in One University System of Georgia eMajor Collaborative Program		
Problem Statement: A problem exists with a gap in the literature regarding technology use among older adult learners.		
Purpose Statement: This case study will examine how older adult learners perceive the use of technology in higher education to increase academic achievement, learning comprehension, and course tasks.		
Research Questions	Data Collection Tool	Item on the Data Collection Tool
RQ1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?	Semi-structured Interviews	Questions: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19
RQ2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?	Semi-structured Interviews	Questions: 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19

Therefore, the researcher implemented vetting and rehearsing to validate the interview questions in the following manner:

- 1) the researcher will select two former Organizational Leadership program students who completed the program to review the instrument, and
- 2) the researchers will solicit assistance from two USG eCampus staff members with at least five years of experience in providing support to adult learners in an online setting.

The researcher emailed a summary of the research questions. The selected persons were requested to submit comments and any adjustments they deemed necessary. The researcher solicited comments from the reviewers on the procedure and interview questions regarding the instrument's comfort, movement, and clarity. The evaluators also inquired whether the questions

were succinct and simple to comprehend, whether there were too many questions, and, if so, which ones might be omitted. The instrument had the potential to be updated and enhanced in preparation for use in the final study based on the reviewers' feedback. However, neither the former students nor the USG eCampus staff provided additional feedback or suggested modifications.

Data Collection

There is a growing interest in empowering older adults to use various types of technology (Peek et al., 2016). Therefore, technology was incorporated in collecting this data, as the interviews were conducted via Zoom, a widely used teleconferencing tool. Once participants were identified, the researcher invited them to participate in a semi-structured interview about their experiences with enrolling in college, specifically the online degree program Organizational Leadership, via the USG eMajor collaborative program. The participants were invited via email and asked to respond within three days if they were willing to participate. They were also asked to submit their signed informed consent form to indicate their intentions to participate in the study. A follow-up email was sent to those potential participants who did not respond.

Once all participants' informed consent forms were received, individual were sent a confirmation email that included the Zoom link and date and time reminder (Appendix G). Interviews were conducted to explore their motivations, needs, and decisions about their online learning process and the technological challenges they face. Each participant received a pseudonym to safeguard their privacy and identity. Rees-Punia et al. (2020) discovered that the process of assigning pseudonyms helps to make participants more comfortable when there is a need to share experiences.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted using Zoom, allotting up to 60 minutes for the interview and 30 minutes afterward. The researcher received this additional time to make special notes regarding the interview if necessary. The researcher's immediate analysis of the interview data was reflected in these supplementary notes, which were included in the study's data collection. The interview process consisted of 19 questions generated by the researcher. Before the start of their interview, the participants received the prompt or research questions:

- RQ1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?
- RQ2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?

In addition, each interview followed the researcher's interview protocol (Appendix F). The researcher observed the general guidelines for conducting interviews, which included a standard set of questions that also allowed the researcher to ask the participants additional probing follow-up questions based on their answers to the initial questions (Creswell, 2007). According to McNamara (2009), the general interview guide allowed the researcher to collect information from each participant consistently. The general interview guide style allowed for some flexibility in obtaining extra input from the participant through probing questions.

The interviews were recorded via Zoom, transcribed by Descript, an audio word processor, and reviewed numerous times for data analysis. The participants also received a copy of their transcript via a thank you email (Appendix H) to review for content accuracy as a part of member checking, which lends credibility to the process. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the member checking approach allows the researcher to "evaluate intentionality" on the part of

the participant while also giving participants the "opportunity to correct errors" and provide new information (p. 314).

The researcher saved a scanned hard copy of the completed interviews and the Zoom recordings on a locked, password-protected laptop. All potentially identifying material in the transcripts were extracted to protect anonymity. To protect their privacy and identity, each participant received a pseudonym. Every effort was taken to preserve data throughout the management process, including analysis, written accounts, and presentation. The transcriptions were retained for a respectable amount of time, no longer than five years, on a password-protected laptop. All information, hard copies, and electronic files will be destroyed when the storage period is over. The destruction will be conducted in a way that prevents the research data from being recreated or from being possible to identify participants. Participants in the study were de-identified once data collection was completed.

Data Analysis

Following data collection, a member check was performed to confirm transcribed data accuracy and dependability. Interview notes and transcripts were securely saved electronically. This study's data analysis method was hand coding utilizing inductive coding. According to Chandra and Shang (2019), inductive coding is a data analysis procedure in which the researcher examines and interprets raw textual data to develop concepts, themes, or a process model based on data interpretations. The process of dividing information into chunks or segments of text and assigning a word or phrase to each segment in order to establish a general sense of it is known as coding (Creswell, 2018). The coded data were evaluated by categorizing comparable emergent themes and labeling them with word phrases. Similar emerging themes were labeled based on similar and emerging replies supplied by participants, which included extensive descriptive

comments. The data analysis procedure included gathering similar words and phrases, reviewing for code assignment, grouping into similar groups, and assigning a code or label (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In addition to hand coding, the qualitative data analysis software package for researchers, NVivo data analysis package, was utilized to validate the results. NVivo is a qualitative and mixed-methods research software tool. The software is used specifically to analyze unstructured text, audio, video, and image data, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, social media, and journal articles (Kent State University, 2022). With NVivo, researchers may work more effectively, thoroughly examine more sources, and justify their conclusions (QSR International, 2022). NVivo enables users to import data from practically any source, analyze data with comprehensive management, query, and visualization capabilities, ask complicated questions of your data to uncover themes and draw clear conclusions, and complete more robust research in less time (QSR International, 2022).

The data was interpreted, processed, and computed based on the responses under the labels. The data analysis procedure allowed the researcher to detect similarities, dissimilarities, patterns, and categorize the responses while preserving the depth of the responses supplied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results were reached when the data analysis was completed. The findings were generated, and conclusions reached (Hays & Singh, 2012). The main goal of this study was to understand the learning experiences of older adult online learners enrolled in fully online degree programs and how academic motivation affects their progress.

Reliability and Validity

Leung (2015) stated that the appropriate use of instruments and data collection processes during a study determines validity in qualitative research. To ensure the validity of this current

qualitative study, the researcher employed a number of approaches. Hammersley (2020) asserted that credibility is the establishment of credible research outcomes that depend on the data's depth rather than quantity. Numerous strategies were used to determine the accuracy of the findings, such as triangulation, which employs different theories, methodologies, and data sources to acquire a better knowledge of the topic under study and member checking (Hammersley, 2020). As explained by Creswell (2013), triangulation is a technique for analyzing outcomes utilizing several data collection methods to assure reliability.

Additionally, according to Patton (1999), triangulation is using various methods or data sources in qualitative research to generate a holistic understanding of phenomena. Before beginning the study, the researcher asked all participants if they would like to participate and informed them that they were free to withdraw at any moment. Participants were asked to respond truthfully to interview questions in order to confirm that the findings were congruent with their personal experiences. Participants provided responses based on their lived experiences and assessments of the motivating factors, needs, and decisions to enroll in an online degree program.

The participants were questioned, and the interviews were recorded to confirm their veracity. After conducting interviews, the researcher transcribed and gave them to the participants for member-checking. Member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a method for investigating the veracity of results. Participants were provided with data or outcomes for verification of accuracy and congruence with their personal experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is crucial for establishing the credibility of qualitative research data; interpretations and conclusions are shared with the participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed responses. Due to the researcher's role as the participants' academic

advisor, the researcher was required to detach herself from the data while focusing on what the participants were experiencing and allowing them to share said experiences. To minimize prejudice and ensure objectivity, the researcher implemented several methods, including using narratives with rich information, numerous data sources for triangulation, and member checks.

Trustworthiness

Following data collection, a member check was performed to confirm transcribed data accuracy and dependability. Interview notes and transcripts were securely saved electronically. This study's data analysis method used hand coding utilizing inductive coding (Saldaña, 2013). The process of dividing information into chunks or segments of text and assigning a word or phrase to each segment in order to establish a general sense of it is known as coding (Creswell, 2018). The coded data was then evaluated by categorizing comparable emergent themes and labeling them with word phrases. Similar emerging themes were labeled based on similar and emerging replies supplied by participants, which included extensive descriptive comments. The data analysis procedure included gathering similar words and phrases, reviewing for code assignment, grouping into similar groups, and assigning a code or label (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The data was interpreted, processed, and computed based on the responses under the labels. The data analysis procedure allowed the researcher to detect similarities, dissimilarities, patterns, and categorize the responses while preserving the depth of the responses supplied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The results were reached when the data analysis was completed. The findings were generated, and conclusions reached (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Summary

The researcher investigated the motivating factors and needs that influence older adult learners' decisions to enroll and persist in an eMajor collaborative program within the University

System of Georgia. Through semi-structured interviews, the qualitative case study analysis method was employed. The researcher was responsible for data gathering methods, coding, analysis, reviewing results, and recommending additional research. The interviewees consisted of twelve older adult students enrolled at three USG eCampus partner institutions. The interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed through the use of Descript. Hand coding and NVivo 12 were used to determine codes, themes, and subthemes from the interview transcripts to answer the research questions. Chapter Four will describe the interview results, offer information about the motivating elements and needs of the research case study participants, and present the findings for each research question.

Chapter IV: Findings

The current qualitative study's overarching goal was to inquire into online education's challenges and motivating factors from the perspective of older adult learners. There is a literature gap regarding the older adult learner in online degree programs. Few studies have been published that center on the older adult learner's perspective, despite researchers having thoroughly examined the topic of online learning (Britto & Rush, 2013). The research questions were addressed virtually using 19 semi-structured qualitative interview questions presented via Zoom. The in-depth interviews were conducted to learn more about the participants' perspectives that could not be easily recognized (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015), which aided in telling the stories of these older adult learners.

The interviews with the twelve older adult learners enrolled in one University System of Georgia eMajor online degree program sought to capture their experiences as online program learners. The interviews also illustrated how technology affects their overall success, drive, determination, challenges, and growth in their online learning environment. The research results were analyzed and interpreted for potential implications related to online learning.

Participants

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the researcher initiated the process of recruitment by sending 58 invitation emails to all Organizational Leadership students who were 45 years of age and older. The emails requested that those interested in participating in the current study respond with their availability for a Zoom interview and return their signed informed consent forms. Of the 58 emails sent, fifteen responded as instructed. However, only twelve of the fifteen scheduled interviewees kept their appointments, while three did not.

The volunteers were interviewed via Zoom for up to 60 minutes over a two-week period. The researcher asked each participant, who was assigned a pseudonym, 19 semi-structured interview questions. The semi-structured interviews revealed personal indications relating to the lived experiences of the older adult learners. Every participant could identify the elements influencing their choice to enroll and pursue their online degree program.

Upon the conclusion of each interview, the Zoom video recordings were downloaded and later uploaded into Descript software for transcription. The researcher emailed each participant their transcript for validation and member checking. Member checking is crucial for establishing the credibility of qualitative research data; interpretations and conclusions are shared with the participants to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed responses (Guba & Lincoln, 2001; Seidman, 2013).

Chapter Four contains results from the semi-structured interviews of the twelve older adult learners, which included five males and seven females. A general overview of the participant's demographic characteristics is provided below (see Table 5). Chapter Four also consists of the results and an evaluation of the inferences made from the data analysis. The data analysis focused on the research issues of older adult students who enroll in online degree programs and persevere despite some constraints, like technological challenges. Additionally, other factors revealed from the interviews impact their program persistence and motivation.

Table 5

Participant Demographics for Older Adult Learners

Participant	Profession	Age	Classification	College Experience
Alice	Healthcare Instructor	47	Junior	Associate's degree
Clifford	Training Specialist	48	Junior	Bachelor's degree
Derek	HVAC Worker	55	Junior	Some college credits
Dexter	Retired Deputy Sheriff	63	Sophomore	Some college credits
Donald	Fire Captain	48	Senior	Some college credits
Doris	Former Flight Attendant	74	Sophomore	No college
Frank	Retired Veteran	60	Junior	Some college credits
Janet	Clerk	52	Sophomore	No college
Serena	Unemployed	51	Junior	Some college credits
Teri	Administrative Assistant	58	Junior	No college
Tonya	Administrative Assistant	59	Junior	No college
Wilma	Private, Non-Profit Employee	64	Senior	No college

Note. All participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their anonymity.

Meet the Participants

Austin and Sutton (2014) discovered that participants are interviewed about their experiences with events that occur in their lives as part of qualitative research. It allows researchers to learn what it is like to comprehend experiences from another's perspective. Each participant is introduced with a succinct biographical statement.

Alice. Alice is a 47-year-old instructor at a University System of Georgia institution in the Allied Health department. She has been a licensed Physical Therapist Assistant for 25

years and graduated from the Physical Therapy Assistant program at her local technical college, earning an associate's degree. She has worked at her institution, holding various positions in the Allied Health program for over 20 years. Alice decided to further her education to earn a bachelor's degree due to "just having the associate's degree in physical therapy."

Clifford. Clifford, a 48-year-old single father of two, works as a training specialist at a well-known West Georgia area employer. He has been with the same employer for nearly 20 years but has held his current position for two years. He worked as a training specialist for nine years. Clifford has earned a degree in management information systems.

Derek. Fifty-five-year-old Derek has been an HVAC technician at a University System of Georgia institution for seven years. He entered college directly from high school and got married shortly after that. Derek left college to farm full-time. He built chicken houses and raised cattle for approximately fourteen years. After farming, he owned and operated a convenience store for a few years and then went to work in manufacturing for nine years before securing the position he currently holds.

Dexter. Dexter is a 63-year-old retired former employee of a local Sheriff's office. He started his career in law enforcement as a Deputy in 1995. Throughout his 25-year career, he "ascended through the ranks as supervisor, manager, first-level executive, and upper-level executive." He concluded his career as the Commander of Operations at the Detention Center before retiring in 2020.

Donald. Donald is a fire captain in South Carolina and is 48 years old. He has been employed with his current fire department in South Carolina for fifteen years. Donald described his job as entailing "fire suppression, fire rescue, and medical assistance to anyone that's in need." He stated the facility is enormous and has over 6,000 employees. Before this role, Donald

spent eight years with his county fire department as a Lieutenant and Paramedic. Donald also revealed that he received an associate's degree in Fire Science from a local technical college. He is married and the father of two, a son and a daughter.

Doris. Doris is a 74-year-old former flight attendant for a major airline and still works for the airline in some capacity, which she does not disclose. She has worked with the airline for 25 years. She also reports working in corporate and retail banking for 30 years.

Frank. Frank is a 60-year-old twice-retired military veteran who enlisted in the Army in 1983. He graduated from basic training and remained in the military for 27 years. Immediately after he retired from military service, he secured a position in Child and Youth Services at a local military base. Frank started as a Program Manager, and his last assignment was as Program Director for the middle school and teens program. Frank revealed that the students in this program ranged in age from eleven to eighteen. The program offered different activities ranging from field trips to sports activities. Frank retired from this career in 2021. He has some college credits from a Historically Black College and University in his native South Carolina.

Janet. Fifty-two-year-old Janet works full-time in the Office of Student Accounts as a clerk at a University System of Georgia institution. She has functioned in this role for one year. Previously, Janet worked in dining services in catering. She does not reveal any other positions held at this institution or elsewhere.

Serena. Serena is a 51-year-old unemployed former trainer for a local law enforcement agency, where she taught the recruits about ethics, professionalism, and sexual harassment at the training academy. After five years, she resigned due to life circumstances and difficulties. She revealed that she had some losses in her life, and she "wasn't getting the promotions that I've

been getting promised for the past several years.” Once she decided to leave her employment, she decided to enter college.

Teri. Teri has been an administrative assistant at a University System of Georgia institution for four years. She is 58 years old and has held various administrative positions. She was also a licensed insurance agent for ten years. She stated that she has “some college but never finished. I started college in 1982 and always held office jobs.”

Tonya. Tonya is 59 years old and has been an administrative assistant “secretary” at a University System of Georgia institution since 1994. She has functioned in her current role for 13 years. Her current job is the only professional position Tonya has held. Her previous jobs were in food service and custodial services.

Wilma. Sixty-four-year-old Wilma was a former stay-at-home mother until 2012, when she began working part-time for six years before getting a full-time job with a non-profit organization. She has been with her current employer since 2018 and reported that she was “in banking, customer service, retail. I’ve done so many jobs.”

Findings

The findings provided a complete summary of the results from the semi-structured interviews and addressed the research questions that guided the current study:

RQ1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?

RQ2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?

The data gathered from the interviews lends support to themes about better understanding older adult learners' current technological acumen in connection to online learning management

systems and discovering what motivates students to enroll in and advance through the online degree program. The findings reflect a summary of the responses of online learners 45 years of age and older enrolled in the online Organizational Leadership degree program.

Few studies have been published that center on the student perspective, despite researchers having thoroughly examined the topic of online learning (Britto & Rush, 2013). The research questions were addressed through virtual Zoom in-depth qualitative interviews conducted to learn about participants' perspectives that could not be easily recognized (Merriam & Tisdale, 2015). More profound knowledge of how academic motivation affected online learners in a technology-based learning environment emerged from the interviews with each participant. Interviewees discussed their challenges with online learning and gave accounts of their interactions with an online learning environment and how those interactions affected their education. Most expressed concern about their experiences and how persistence and learning the course material related to their career aspirations boosted their academic motivation. The participants demonstrated a strong desire to complete their degree goals. The purpose of this current study was to capture the essence of students' perceptions and experiences as online learners and the elements that influenced their motivation to continue until their degrees are completed.

The current case study methodological approach was utilized to comprehend experiences by interpreting them, identifying themes, and drawing inferences about lived experiences such as feelings, thoughts, and perceptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Based on Creswell's (2013) approach, participants' responses about key topics were continuously compared throughout the analysis to learn commonalities across the participants' responses.

From the viewpoint of the older adult learners in this current study, the data accurately represented each participant's depth and unique experiences. Before being placed into NVivo software for validation, data was manually coded and categorized into themes and sub-themes. The researcher used phrases and terms articulated by the participants to generate codes from the data using inductive coding (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell (2013) states the following about coding:

Qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the “bottom up,” by organizing the data inductively into increasingly more abstract units of information. This inductive process involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes. (p. 45)

Participants' quotes were used to support the themes and subthemes that encapsulated their experiences. According to qualitative research experts, it is crucial to provide detailed written descriptions that enable others to comprehend the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). The data revealed four significant themes and fifteen accompanying subthemes (Table 6). The emerging themes include (a) Program and Degree, (b) Instructor Influence, (c) Technology and Online Learning, and (d) Experiences and Needs.

Table 6

Emerging Themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Program and Degree	Research and Decision to Enroll Relevance/Applicability
Instructor Influence	Communication Accessibility/Availability Academic Expectations Committed to student success
Technology and Online Learning	Flexibility Navigation of Learning Management System Online versus Face-to-Face Option Current knowledge and technological experience Feelings about the online program Academic Challenges and Rigor
Experiences and Needs	Relationship with peers Various needs of the learner Support services

Discussion of Emerging Themes

Program and Degree. This theme addresses the process in which the adult learner selected the Organizational Leadership degree program and how earning the degree is relevant to their current or future career path. The adult learners' decision to enroll in college and select an online program was influenced by the process of gathering research and reflecting on their personal and professional experiences. Responses evolved from one or two places for all interviewees. They all revealed that potential programs were researched online by themselves, a family member, or a friend. They also shared learning about the USG eMajor Organizational Leadership program from a supervisor, colleague, family member, or friend (Temple, 2009). Clifford, who holds a bachelor's degree in Management Information Systems, explained how he discovered the online program:

The process I used included doing some research online but mainly hearing about the program from one of my co-workers, who is about to graduate and reminded me that our

company pays for us to go to college. Because I already have a degree, I just never thought about going back even though my company will pay for it. I am a single father of two little girls and that plays a factor in everything I do. It helps to be able to earn my degree and still be a Dad.

Five of the twelve interview contributors are employed by University System of Georgia (USG) institutions and shared similar experiences as Clifford regarding their enrollment decisions. One interviewee, Alice stated that her supervisor and coworkers encouraged her to consider the online program and said, “it would be a good opportunity for me to earn my degree. Plus, I could use TAP.” The University System of Georgia (USG) promotes the encouragement of employees and their educational goals by stating

As part of its mission statement, the University System of Georgia is committed to ‘the recruitment, hiring, and retention of the best possible faculty, staff, and administration.’

The Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia is committed to creating a more educated Georgia. Both of these commitments extend internally as well as externally. To meet its employees' evolving needs, the University System of Georgia (USG) has established an educational assistance program, the Tuition Assistance Program (TAP). The purpose of TAP is to foster the professional growth and development of its eligible employees. (USG, 2022, para. 1)

In contrast, three participants revealed that their decisions to return to or enter college was solely related to job security. Tonya’s account was most poignant in that she spoke about how “all the secretaries were pressured to go back to school, or we would be fired or released because they wanted everyone to have a degree.” Janet and Teri shared that their leadership urged administrative staff to seek a bachelor’s degree at their institutions because, as Janet stated, “I

work at a college and it doesn't look right to work in education and not have a degree myself. I was told I would never be able to advance here without a degree".

In addition, all respondents were in agreement that an online program would offer flexibility and convenience, allowing participants to manage their everyday lives and in Serena's case, finish work begun years earlier. She shared the following about her decision,

For so many years, I started this. I started the road of education over 20 years ago. I stopped. I went back. I stopped again. I went back, and I decided that you know, I'm not going to do it for career advancement. I want to do it because I started it so many years ago and stopped so many times.

Serena was not the only interviewee who was committed to completing what she started years ago. Donald's decision was two-fold. He attributed encouragement from his son coupled with his desire to finish what he started as an example to his children,

I went to college out of high school and didn't finish my degree. You know, different types of things came up. It came around again, and recognizing that I needed to finish what I started after my son kind of motivated me to actually go and finish my degree. He reminded me that I always told him and his sister to get a good education, but I wasn't taking my own advice. I wasn't practicing what I preached.

Another component of this theme is relevance and applicability to the current job market. Gontkovicova and Duová Spiáková (2015) discovered the importance of relevance to adult learners when obtaining a degree. Wilma states, "it is important for my degree in Organizational Leadership to mean something. It has to be worth the paper it's printed on." USG Major (2022) states that the degree program is versatile and applicable because of the four available concentrations. Online learners may select healthcare administration, office

administration and technology, public service, and social justice as directed electives.

Concentrations are available within the curriculum to allow for industry-specific specialization (USG eMajor, 2022).

Although Derek was not aware of the concentrations, he shared that he believes the degree will help in his future career opportunities and goals:

I was not aware of all the tracks that are available through the Organizational Leadership degree. The public service, office tech, healthcare, and social justice. I honestly just thought I would try to get a business degree, but this degree seems to fit well with my future goals of advancing in my work.

Although many interviewees were aware of the industry-specific concentrations and believe that the degree has value, as a result, eight of the twelve agreed that a degree of any level would be ideal. Doris, age 74, stated that she had no idea what the degree signified. Jovially, she stated, “I was placed into this program without completely understanding what the heck it was. It was fine because any degree at my age would be a miracle. Any degree is better than no degree, but I need it to be worth the paper it’s printed on.”

Instructor Influence. The influence of faculty interactions on the experiences of older adult students in the online classroom emerged as a key theme during the course of this study. This theme is comprised of the subthemes of communication, accessibility and availability, academic expectations, and commitment to success. Communication refers to how the instructor provides feedback, accessibility pertains to the participant's ability to communicate with the instructor, academic expectations refer to the clarity with which the course's requirements are outlined, and the instructor's commitment to their students' ability to succeed in their course.

Numerous individuals reported having favorable experiences with instructors. Few participants reported unfavorable encounters with instructors. The majority of participants reported positive interactions with their instructors. Alice shared the following regarding the interactions with her professors:

Anytime I've ever had a question, I personally don't hesitate to email or call the professor and all of them so far have been very timely in responding. And if there is ever a concern or a question, they usually give very clear instructions on what it is I need to do.

Along the same vein, Doris enthusiastically shared that her interactions with professors have been great:

I always share with them that I am not a traditional student, so they have been very understanding and helpful. I still think that I'd be a bit more at ease in a classroom; however, I am determined to get through this with flying colors.

Serena, on the other hand, had this to share about a not-so-favorable experience with one of her instructors:

I think most of my professors were pretty good at communicating except just one. I just did not understand why he would never respond to me with my concerns. I followed the protocol and did what he expected as far as communication was concerned and he just never responded. I had to make contact with someone at eMajor to get in touch with him and then he had sort of an attitude. But that was the only time I had a problem.

Fayer (2014) conducted a qualitative single-case research in which instructor feedback and course design were perceived by learners to be the most essential aspects of an online course. Feyer (2014) further demonstrated that timely feedback enhanced students' comprehension of course topics. As Serena eluded to above, there were some issues with

assignments that she needed clarified. She stated, “the date for an assignment changed or did not line up with what the syllabus said. I only needed to be sure I had the correct information.”

The online environment conveniently gives learners access to the classroom around-the-clock. Students may anticipate that instructors are constantly monitoring the classroom, leading the learner to believe that feedback should be immediate (Coyner & McCann, 2004). Janet shared the following about accessibility to and availability of her instructors:

There’s a lack of interaction. I think those stick with you more than the ones who are really good at responding. Like if you email a professor late at night, I kind of expect something within 24 hours, even if it’s a weekend because that’s when our assignments are due. I expect them to watch the portal closer at that time because there’s a chance someone will have a question. I just expect a quicker turn around.

Responding promptly to student inquiries and promptly issuing grades are examples of timely and relevant feedback. Instructors that provide thorough online feedback provide students with explicit expectations for their work's performance results and the ability to identify academic development areas (Higley, 2016). Students can find the delay in feedback in an online learning environment inconvenient. Frank initially believed he would receive immediate feedback during this first semester in his degree program. He shared how he appreciates instructor feedback, especially during times when he may be struggling with an assignment:

Generally, the feedback is positive. I’ve struggled with, in a couple of instances, really wanting more feedback than I’ve gotten during my first semester. I did not understand the system. I thought whenever I had a question, I would receive an answer. Not the case. But that was an isolated incident and I have had instructors go above and beyond to assist me, even with the smallest question that I might have for them.

Doris echoed the same sentiments as Frank. However, she added the following about receiving grades in a timely manner:

There was this one professor I had who did not grade a single thing all semester. So, you had no idea how you were doing. He didn't give any grades or feedback, so you were basically winging it. He didn't grade anything until the last two weeks of class. That was the most frustrating experience. You would call and nothing. You would send an email and nothing. I complained and shared my thoughts in the course evaluation. It was unfair to all of us.

Unlike Frank and Doris, Teri said she has never had an issue accessing her instructors. She solely communicates via email and that she receives responses as needed and in a timely manner:

I only make contact with my instructors through email. I know some people who call theirs and have Zoom meetings but I do not. But any time I have had a question or needed something, they always respond in a timely manner which is really good and helpful, especially if you are trying to meet a deadline for an assignment.

Academic expectations and having clear expectations about course content were a must for all participants. McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) identified ongoing assessment as crucial for effective engagement between the online learner and instructor; motivation occurs when the instructor provides ongoing assessment throughout an online course to ensure continuous learner comprehension and the capacity to perform at an appropriate level relevant to course expectations (Fink, 2013; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006).

Dexter shared the following regarding understanding course assignments:

It took me a little while to get a system down as far as knowing when things were due but the course dates are clear and the syllabus is one of the first things you see when you start a class. So, you know going in what to expect.

Regarding the instructor's commitment and dedication to student success, the participants believe there is a sincere desire to see their students succeed in the course.

Tonya shared the following about having access to her instructors:

They understand and want to work with older adult learners. During a time in my life when I experienced a tragedy, one of my professors offered to schedule a virtual meeting with me to discuss my grades and help me stay on track so I could successfully complete his course. He worked with me and I thought that was super nice of him to do that.

A college professor must be committed to fostering the achievement of their students. Student success is a combination of knowledge, responsibility, connection, academic achievement, and student advancement, among other ideas and activities. Legg (2020) explained how student success depends on the extent to which students are prepared to achieve their current and future academic, personal, and professional goals through the acquisition of knowledge, the development of a sense of responsibility and self-reliance, and the promotion of a connection to the college and wider community.

Technology and Online Learning. Technology and online learning are a major component of this study. Every participant mentioned flexibility as an important component of being enrolled in an online degree program. The following are a few comments that were shared. Donald stated, “online for me was convenient. I love how flexible it is” and Doris shared how although technology is not her first choice there are aspects of online learning that she embraces:

Although I really prefer face-to-face courses, having online classes gives me so

much flexibility with my job, getting things done around the house, my obligations at church and all my community activities.

The participants acknowledged that the learning management platforms required an adjustment period when navigating the online management system. Regardless of their technology knowledge level, many recognized a learning curve. Frank shared the following:

Being out of college for almost 40 years meant I had no clue. I had heard people talk about doing school online but again, no idea what it entailed. I had secretaries during my time in the Army and in civilian work. This is my fourth semester and I still get confused. The very first time I logged in, I could not find my course and that was because I needed to manage two different sites. The only reason I am able to be successful even now is because I have help from my family and academic advisor.

Clifford and Janet, on the other hand, stated that they had no issues with navigating the online management system. Clifford holds an undergraduate degree already, and Janet works for a USG institution. Clifford confidently shared the following:

I had no issues. In fact, I had a terrific time. I mean, I have an information system background, so navigating was pretty easy for me. It was second nature because after all, I grew up with computers so naturally I can just go.

However, when asked the follow-up question about accessing the learning platform for the first time, he admitted he was confused. He stated, "I had never seen it before, so I didn't quite understand the process. I had to get some help but soon got it." The same was true for Janet, who boastfully stated initially that "she had no issues." However, she retracted her statement when reminded about the first time she logged into the learning management system. She admitted that

her colleagues assisted her. “Well, of course, I needed help the first time. I was unfamiliar with it.”

In terms of online versus face-to-face instruction, this group of learners prefers face-to-face classes over online programs. Adult learners chose face-to-face learning because it provided higher learning, better information understanding, better communication between learner and faculty, more accessible access to professors for assistance, and better learner-to-faculty involvement (Mkhastshwa & Hoffman, 2019). The consensus of ease and flexibility, however, outweighed the overall preference. Although online communication is preferred, there is universal agreement among this demographic that face-to-face interactions have advantages. Teri mentioned the following:

I have a very busy life with, living on a farm with my husband while raising quail and having nine dogs. I need an online program to be successful. But there was something about being in a classroom and interacting with my professors and other students that made my classes more valuable. Not that I am not getting anything out of the online coursework. It just seemed like you had the opportunity to learn more while physically being in a classroom.

Wilma and Doris share the same opinions as Teri. Wilma stated, “I knew working full time, I would not be able to run back and forth between home, work, and school. I needed something more flexible even though I feel in person is better. I think you learn more.” Doris had additional comments about the benefits of face-to-face learning, “I am not really learning anything in these classes. No one is teaching anything. We just do the assignments and get graded on it.”

On the other hand, Donald and Dexter believe they are experiencing the best of both worlds. Both can take classes online and acquire a significant amount of knowledge concurrently.

Donald stated, “the project management course I took was very beneficial with a group project. It worked out great, and I learned a lot.” Dexter had a similar experience. He shared, “I never had any concerns or trepidations about online learning. I have had great experiences and learned a great deal about organizational leadership.”

Despite the continued growth of online learning technologies in higher education, it has become increasingly challenging to engage older adult learners with technology (Bonk et al., 2015). In this case study, although the technology journey for most participants began with ambivalence and uncertainty, the technology experience for all of them has improved each term.

While three of the twelve interviewees claimed they had no reservations about enrolling in an online degree program, the other nine readily agreed that their technical abilities had greatly improved since they first began their online degree program. Derek revealed the following:

Oh, I feel much more confident about my ability to navigate through the different programs we do. True you might have to remind me a few times in the beginning of the semester especially if I am a little take back when something changes. But once I get that reminder or two, I can adapt and be okay for the rest of the semester, at least.

Donald explained that he desired to learn more about and gain a deeper understanding of the computer. “Being in an online program did not necessarily do that for me, but with each semester, I get better at it and learn more. By no means am I an expert but I have learned so much since enrolling in college and this program.” Wilma, unlike Donald, did not have a desire to learn more about computers. She had the following to share,

Oh, my goodness. I was completely clueless and had no desire or intentions of learning any more than I had to. I didn’t know how to do anything. It was so difficult. I felt

hopeless and afraid, wondering how I would do this. But it was folks like Ms. Vicki and the other staff who basically held my hand until I felt comfortable enough to try it on my own. I am better now but still ask the same questions repeatedly.

Tonya admits that her technology skills have “grown tremendously. When I first started the program, I was not that savvy at all. But having been in it several years now, I’m much better.”

The three participants who claimed to have no technology deficiencies used descriptive phrases like “I am competent in the area”, “it’s easy”, “I have no issues” and “it’s just second nature to me” whereas the other nine used words like “intimidating”, “scary”, “frightening”, “anxious”, and “fearful”. Doris specifically said:

Being a senior citizen without much recent experience with online learning, it is difficult. I am so accustomed to having verbal conversations along with hard copies to complete and on top of that, accessing my classes online made me feel so timid, anxious and fearful of the unknown.

Online education takes significantly more self-discipline and initiative to stay on task. Coursework and assignments can be tedious and time consuming. Learners must devote time to studying and applying what they are learning outside of the classroom (Riha & Pitt, 2020).

The first reaction from participants when asked if there was a specific project or assignment that may have caused them to rethink their decision to enroll in school was no. The more the participant contributed to their initial response, however, the more their memory was renewed. Two of the best examples of this involve Derek and Serena. Derek said the following:

Well not that I can think of. I can’t remember anything that would make me want to quit. But wait one minute, my first semester was when I took just one course. It was a math

class because I was so concerned about having to take it. It was really tough and the anxiety was intense but I hired a tutor and got my sons to work with me at home.

Although I was stressed out and wondered why in the world had I gotten myself into, I ended up with a 99.8 average in the class. That solidified my decision to continue. There have been a couple of times when I was extremely busy and had some projects due.

During those times, I would look at my wife and ask her, what was I thinking? However, I've been able to push through those times.

Serena shared her experience as follows:

Honestly no. None that I've taken so far but I know there's got to be one coming up that I will say Oh my God. I can't believe I have to take this class. Well you know what?

Scratch that. It was math. We have a hate-hate relationship. Once I see numbers, I start to freak out and I remember when I first went into the school and started talking about enrolling, the first thing I asked was if I would have to take math. When I found out I would have to take it, I was ready to back out and forget the whole thing. But my husband encouraged me to hire a tutor. I hired two and cried every day. I asked everyday why I even considered returning to school at my age. For what? But it turned out well in the end. I got an A.

The majority of respondents did recall one challenging course, typically one from the core curriculum like math, science, or English. Only two, meanwhile, identified Organizational Leadership major-specific courses as a challenge.

Experiences and Needs. In traditional classrooms, students have several opportunities to connect with their instructors and one another, and researchers know this interaction is crucial to student achievement. Peer social interaction should not be overlooked in an online course. Social

interaction in online learning can promote student engagement, motivation, and performance. Educators must explore how to establish opportunities for meaningful and sustained social contacts in online courses, especially when many learners are enrolled in multiple online courses while managing home and job responsibilities. (Kwaske & McLennan, 2022)

Shekhar and Shailendra (2021) stated that learners gain significant knowledge by communicating their thoughts to their peers and participating in activities that allow them to learn from their peers. They learn how to organize and arrange learning activities, work collaboratively with others, give and receive feedback, and evaluate their learning. Clifford stated that his peer relationship is strictly about coursework and not developing friendships.

I have not necessarily developed friendships with my classmates. We speak in class about course assignments and have study groups in that app where you can text each other. I can't remember the name of it now. Oh yeah, it's GroupMe. Anyway, that has been a beneficial way to get together and share ideas without going against the code of ethics and be accused of cheating.

Donald stated that he has not developed relationships with his peers. He shared "I had group project to do so I had to collaborate within a group. So, dealing directly with other students itself is really not as common as it would be in a traditional setting."

Frank and six others had a different opinion from Donald. Frank stated that he developed one or two relationships with his peers during his first semester. He proudly shared the following:

I would say the younger students and I connected. And of course, they are more versed on all the computer related stuff or just versed on some things in general that I might not be as aware of. So just interacting with them and they assess it saying, 'Okay this is the easy way to get into it or this is the way I get into it or this is the proper way to

get into it. So, with them letting me learn from them and giving me a few tidbits that helped made it easier for me. Then if I would not be so sure about something, then I could go back to them for help.

Frank also stated that this was like “learning something from my peers that is just as valuable as anything I could have learned from them about a subject.”

Furthermore, because adult learners differ from other students who are typically enrolled in college programs, college deans, academic advisors, course designers, or other support staff who are not very familiar with the current adult learner experience may not be able to adequately meet the needs of adult learners who are pursuing bachelor's degrees (Caruth, 2014; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Adult learners share the need for independence and the desire for a decent amount of autonomy and control over their educational experiences (Allen & Zhang, 2016). This inclination indicates that adult learners naturally want to control their educational surroundings, learning experiences, and other aspects of their degree programs, such as course selection. Adult learners believe that having control over their programs of study will allow them to modify them to meet their unique needs better. They can do this by serving as their advisors and advocate (McDonald, 2012).

Thereby, older adult learners are the ones who best understand their needs to be successful in online courses. The following are the needs that evolved from the twelve semi-structured interviews (Table 7):

Table 7

Needs As Identified By Participants

Identified Needs	Description
1. In-Person and Virtual Workshops	In-person and virtual workshops to assist with student success
2. Information Graduate Programs	Guidance on researching and applying to graduate school
3. Mentors for Online Platform Assistance	Creation of mentor contingency to assist older adult learners who are technologically challenged
4. Information on Accessibility Services	For learners who may be impaired or learning disabled, make resources known
5. Resources Geared Toward The Older Adults	There are no specialized resources for the older adult learner in the online learning setting.

Some older adult learners believe both in-person and virtual workshops to help with online success would be most beneficial. Doris shared:

I do feel that older adult orientations would be helpful especially if returning to school after many years or entering for the first time. Some in-person tutoring to familiarize older adult learners with the various platforms would also be a plus.

Approximately half of those interviewed for this case study indicated that they are interested in graduate school after receiving their degree. Alice is among those participants who wish to further their education after receiving their degree in Organizational Leadership:

Because I needed a degree to keep my job, I don't ever want anyone to threaten my employment again. Having an associate's degree didn't cut it. It wasn't good enough. So, after I finish this degree, I will earn my master's in something. It would be great if eCampus could provide information on master's degrees that go along with a degree in Organizational Leadership.

There were several mentions of shadowing other students who are confident in their abilities to navigate the online platform. Tonya shared the following:

Because I am in a unique position and work for the school where I am getting my degree, I have had the good fortune to go to others for help when I get confused about navigating the online platforms GaView or GoView. I am thinking now how great it would be to have somewhat like a mentor when it comes to this. I am not sure how it would work but maybe it could be a student worker who can help those of us who need it through a Zoom meeting or something like that.

Approximately one-half of participants mentioned the feature in the online learning platform related to accessibility services. Those students who can benefit from having the content read to them feels it is a feature that older adult learners may not know about. Teri pointed this out in her interview:

I am the type of person who learns best when I read out loud or have something read to me. So, one night while I was trying to get more familiar with one of my courses, I stumbled across a feature that read everything to you. I had hit pay dirt. It was exactly what I needed and I bet you a million dollars, older adult learners like me have no idea it's even there.

Older adult learners who participated in this interview process stated that they are aware support services for online students but none available specifically for older adult learners.

Wilma shared information about the University System of Georgia over 62 tuition free policy:

I get a lot of support from free tutors online and free textbooks in the course. There is also a librarian that you can use and an online writing center. The best bit of information I learned was that because I am old, I can go to school for free. I had no idea and I bet the

state does this because people my age won't take advantage of it. Anyway, a person who is 62 and older is eligible to receive free tuition. Why don't more people know about this benefit? They probably think that they are retired so why would they want to go to school? But truth is, more people my age are still working because they need to continue to contribute financially to their households or they need health insurance and other benefits that are obviously much better if you're working.

The results of the twelve semi-structured interviews thoroughly addressed the two research questions that guided this case study. The alignment tables demonstrate the number of participants who addressed each theme and sub-theme. (Table 8 and Table 9).

Table 8

Alignment of Themes With Research Question 1

Research Question	Themes/Subthemes	# Participants Who Addressed Theme
How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?	Theme 1: Program and Degree 1) Research and Decision to Enroll 2) Relevance and Applicability	1) 12 2) 8
	Theme 2: Instructor Influence 1) Communication 2) Accessibility/Availability 3) Academic Expectations 4) Committed to Student Success	1) 12 2) 12 3) 7 4) 6
	Theme 3: Technology and Online Learning 1) Flexibility 2) Navigation of Learning Management System 3) Online versus Face-To-Face Option 4) Current Knowledge and Technological Experience 5) Feelings About Online Program 6) Academic Challenges and Rigor	1) 12 2) 10 3) 6 4) 12 5) 10 6) 11
	Theme 4: Experiences and Needs 1) Relationship with Peers 2) Various needs of the Learner 3) Support Services	1) 8 2) 12 3) 10

Research Question 1

How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?

Adult learners balance their education with other commitments such as family, work, and other social and civic responsibilities (Romero & Barbera, 2012). The emerging themes and subthemes revealed how motivation affected the older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online program, including flexibility, convenience, and eMajor faculty and staff support. The most recurring themes were the urge to complete what the participants started, acquire the degree for personal fulfillment, or gain an advantage in the workplace through promotion and higher pay.

Three participants were threatened with termination or lost their jobs because they did not have an undergraduate degree. For these participants, earning their degrees is personal. All three believe that the consensus among their employers was they would never achieve the goal. Participants Frank and Wilma shared that they were each awarded top leadership roles. The positions were rescinded after Human Resources discovered they did not meet the necessary educational requirements. According to the job description, participant Doris was terminated when she challenged the decision not to hire her for a position she was indeed qualified for. She stated the following:

I was denied the position because I did not have a bachelor's degree after it was offered. They said I was hired and then took it away from me and it was devastating. The job posting clearly stated that years of experience could be used in lieu of the degree. When I made a big stink about it, they decided to let me go. Devastated and shamed again. So, I

decided right then and there, I was gonna get my bachelor's degree and it would be something no one could ever take away from me.

These encounters have led Doris, Frank, Wilma, and others to feel that some people do not think they can accomplish the goal of higher education because of their age. This is perhaps the greatest motivator.

Research Question 2

How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program (Table 9)?

Table 9

Alignment of Themes With Research Question 2

Research Question	Themes/Subthemes	# Participants Who Addressed Theme
How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?	Theme 1: Program and Degree 1) Research and Decision to Enroll 2) Relevance and Applicability	1) 10 2) 8
	Theme 2: Instructor Influence 1) Communication 2) Accessibility/Availability 3) Academic Expectations 4) Committed to Student Success	1) 12 2) 12 3) 9 4) 10
	Theme 3: Technology and Online Learning 1) Flexibility 2) Navigation of Learning Management System 3) Online versus Face-To-Face Option 4) Current Knowledge and Technological Experience 5) Feelings About Online Program 6) Academic Challenges and Rigor	1) 12 2) 12 3) 6 4) 12 5) 12 6) 11
	Theme 4: Experiences and Needs 1) Relationship with Peers 2) Various needs of the Learner 3) Support Services	1) 10 2) 12 3) 12

Ten of the twelve participants defined their needs and experiences in an online degree program in a similar way. The participants voiced numerous experiences and needs. For example, Derek feels the program will receive more students like him if presentations are made at work. He stated:

I was eligible for tuition assistance through my job six months after I started working but never thought I should go back. I felt it was meant for other people. Not those like me who was a blue-collar worker. If I had started as soon as I was eligible, I would be almost finished by now. I think that presentations to employees like me given by eCampus would be so beneficial. For me, hearing what Ms. Tracy had to say in that presentation is what gave me the final motivation to return to school. I believe presentations such as the one I sat through would probably help more people make up their mind and decide to go back. It gave me the drive and determination to finish what I started back in the early 80s. I won't ever forget it. Her words that day changed my life.

Dexter shared the following about course design and course alerts:

I am looking at my eMajor class now, since we've been talking. Going over the timeline for the class I'm currently in. It took me a while to figure this which course online platform out but now that I understand it, it is kind of convenient. Mind you, every semester I have to refamiliarize myself with it because if you don't use something every single day, you tend to forget it. But there is an app that I have on my phone that lets me know every time something happens in my course and it is really helpful. I know when the instructor has graded assignments and when assignments are due. I can use it with my eMajor classes and my Brightspace D2L classes. It helps keep me organized.

Doris shared the following experience about how earning a degree in Organizational Leadership will help her professionally and personally:

It may benefit me personally in church and social organizations. Receiving this degree would be more of a personal satisfaction than benefit. I just want to say, "I finally did it!" If it fits in at some point in the future, then so be it. But I am 74 years old, after all.

Lastly, all twelve participants shared a need for consistent interaction with their instructors for program completion and success. One of the study's overarching themes was that communication with the instructor was important to all participants. Thompson et al. (2013) conducted a qualitative study, and the findings indicated that immediate student feedback was vital to student achievement, as did instructor feedback. The outcomes of this case study revealed that access to the instructor, receiving feedback, and understanding course expectations were crucial to student achievement, consistent with Thompson et al. (2013). According to Karp and Bork (2012), one of the abilities a college student needs is knowing when to request help from the instructor. In his qualitative study, Meyer (2014) discovered that interaction between the instructor and students was crucial when taking or teaching an online course.

Summary

Chapter Four included a summary of the descriptions supplied by the adult learners who were interviewed about their desire to participate in and complete an online bachelor's degree program. The researcher also extracted the participants' statements of their needs from the data. Furthermore, the researcher shed light on numerous aspects of their motivation to persevere, personal experiences, and success needs that this case study participants explicitly addressed. In Chapter Five of this study, the researcher will provide a critical discussion that includes a summary of the entire research project, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research, implications, dissemination of findings, and concluding comments.

Chapter V: Conclusions

Chapter Five aims to promote a more profound knowledge of the motivating factors and needs of older adult learners participating in an online undergraduate degree program. In addition, Chapter Five seeks to examine the findings, limitations, implications, and recommendations for future research before drawing conclusions. A dissemination of the findings is also revealed based on this qualitative case study research design. This qualitative approach was used to understand the reasons older adult learners enroll and persist in a technology-driven degree program despite having limited technology knowledge. To investigate this phenomenon further, semi-structured interviews were used in this study. The data were used to answer the current study's guiding research questions:

Research Question 1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?

Research Question 2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program?

Summary of the Study

This study aimed to investigate the motivating factors and needs that influence older adult learners' decisions to enroll in and complete their degrees in one University System of Georgia eMajor Collaborative program. The current study further sought to investigate older adult learners' attitudes toward technology use. This study employed virtual interviews to investigate the personal accounts of twelve participants in an online learning environment and their experiences returning to college at an older age. All learners, including older adults, gain knowledge when they are motivated. As a result, the best strategy to ensure students' success in higher education is first to understand what drives and sustains them during the learning process

(Sogunro, 2014). While online learning has been examined, research on the older adult learner in online learning platforms is minimal. Even though this population makes up a significant number of online students, few studies have focused on the older adult learner (those 45 and up) using technology. However, considerable research has been conducted on the subject of online education. Previous research has looked at learner motivation, student engagement, and the impact of online participation patterns on students' classroom performance (Cercone, 2008; Coombs-Richardson, 2007; Park, 2007; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005). Previous research focused on the variations in self-directed learning readiness between students aged 18 and 25 and those aged 25 and up (Ke & Xie, 2009).

Despite extensive research on adult learners, there is still a data gap. There has been no research into the characteristics that inspire and retain adult learners (aged 45 and older) participating in online degree programs and the strategies they apply to overcome technological barriers. The goal of this case study was to understand the challenges that older adult learners experience, as well as the impact that self-directed online learning has on their accomplishments. As a result, it will assist the higher education community in exploring and filling these gaps.

Over the course of two weeks, twelve sixty-minute semi-structured interviews with adult learners were conducted. According to the interviews, each participant candidly revealed their stories in both comparable and different ways. The researcher identified four overarching themes and fifteen subthemes. Each participant responded to four areas in total: a) program and degree, b) instructor influence, c) technology and online learning, and d) experiences and needs.

The individuals in this case study all shared the same characteristics. They were all 45 or older, enrolled in an Organizational Leadership degree program, and enrolled in one of three USG eMajor collaborative partner institutions. By sharing these experiences as part of this study,

it is expected that additional research should be performed to include the experiences of the older adult learner. The results of this case study on the motivation and needs of online undergraduate older adult learners to persist to degree completion are summarized in the context of the theoretical framework presented in Chapters One and Two and evaluated by considering the existing findings in the field and previous literature.

Chapter One explained the purpose of the study, introduced the research questions, and the implications of the study (Creswell, 2012). Chapter One also revealed a gap in the literature regarding technology use among older adult learners. Many older adult learners have returned to or entered college for the first time to get their undergraduate degrees. With the evolution of technology, these processes have changed. In the past, a student interested in college would expect to complete and submit the required documents in hardcopy form. The process is now completed entirely online. Course delivery has also evolved since this population was last in the classroom. The days of attending class on particular days and listening to lectures are limited and no longer preferred. In addition, older adult learners must now learn to navigate the learning management system to access their courses and be successful online. The researcher sought to analyze their motivation, requirements, and experiences despite technological disparities.

Chapter Two examined the literature. It was determined that enrollment among older adult learners is rising, and institutions must meet the demands. However, research does not reflect older adult learners' specific needs and motivators. The gaps in the current empirical literature that need to be filled include a) research links institutions, faculty, and staff to adult learners' comfort with technology, b) campus partners must develop new and inventive techniques relative to technology, and c) colleges and universities can help ensure the success of older adult learners by becoming involved and delivering ongoing assistance. The current study

will help fill these gaps by expanding the knowledge for institutions, educators, and future researchers.

Chapter Three highlighted the qualitative process applied to comprehending the motivating factors and needs that impact older adult learners' decisions to enroll and remain in the collaborative University System of Georgia eMajor program, Organizational Leadership, through the implementation of semi-structured virtual interviews. Chapter Three provided the methodology framework for collecting and analyzing the data presented in Chapter Four.

The descriptions provided by the older adult learners who were interviewed about their desire to earn and complete an online bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership were summarized in Chapter Four. The participant's statements of their needs were also taken out of the data by the researcher. In addition, the participant in this case study explicitly discussed a number of aspects of their success needs, personal experiences, and motivation to persevere.

Lastly, Chapter Five introduces the limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research. In addition, Chapter Five includes the dissemination of the findings. The conclusion of the current study provides an analysis of the improved knowledge offered by this qualitative research case study. It emphasizes how this study contributes to the broader body of knowledge in online learning.

Analysis of the Findings

The current study's findings have increased knowledge about the experiences of twelve older adult learners in an online degree program. In Chapters One and Two of this study, a self-efficacy and constructivism theoretical framework were used, and supporting literature was given to demonstrate the necessity for future research on this topic.

The goal of self-efficacy and constructivism is to demonstrate how motivating variables influence how and why older adult learners remain in a degree program in the face of specific deterrents, such as technology. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy is the degree to which an individual believes in one's capacity to perform a task or succeed in given situations. Furthermore, Bandura (2008) contends that self-efficacy is not a feature that some people have and others do not. Instead, he maintains that everybody may improve their self-efficacy regardless of their background or current circumstances. Regarding constructivism, Aubrey and Riley (2015) discovered that a person's cognitive growth is shaped by a combination of personal and societal experiences.

This section further provides a succinct review of the results reported in Chapter Four. This study's objectives were to (1) better understand students' current technological abilities regarding online learning management systems and (2) discover what motivates students to enroll in and progress through the degree program. This case study also examined the needs of older persons as students and the impact of online education on the student's motivation to persist until program completion. Given the participants' different backgrounds, career trajectories, and ages (age range 47-74), the sample provided a wide range of motivational experiences that guided this research effectively. According to Ryan and Deci (2020), motivation is crucial in encouraging behaviors that promote academic performance and achievement.

The researcher also sought to understand the older adult learners' perceptions of using technology while earning an undergraduate degree in the Organizational Leadership degree program via USG eMajor collaborative. Therefore, in an effort to better understand the needs, motivating factors and experiences of the older adult learner, an inductive approach was used to bring light to the data and the emerging themes. According to Thomas (2003),

The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. Key themes are often obscured, reframed or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis procedures imposed by deductive data analysis such as those used in experimental and hypothesis testing research. (p. 2)

Participants in the study were asked to share their stories, allowing them to give voice to their decisions to enroll and continue in an online degree program in their own words, despite the challenges they may face due to technology and other systems that suppress them due to their lack of technological savvy and age (Kara et al., 2019). Using quotes, the findings were presented in the perspectives of the participants. Each statement captured the essence of the participants' words, and the data was then classified into four themes and fifteen subthemes. Conclusions are discussed in this chapter depending on how the findings relate to the literature and the research questions. There are implications for older adult learners in terms of managing and navigating various learning management platforms and technology in general. To better understand older adult learners and their experiences in an online degree context, findings were evaluated using self-efficacy and constructivism theories, which aided in investigating the motivators and challenges present within this demographic.

The self-efficacy learning theory and constructivism learning paradigm guided this case study to determine older adult learners' perceptions, needs, and experiences as well as explore their historical and cultural perspective as highlighted by research conducted by Jordan (2013), Mikropoulos and Natsis (2011), and lastly Bandura (1977), understanding that self-determination is a great motivator for adult learners.

Delving more into the theoretical framework for this study, Bandura (1977) revealed that self-efficacy is a set of ideas about an individual that determines how successfully they can carry out a plan of action in hypothetical situations as well as their belief in their ability to achieve in a given situation, in this case, a technology-driven environment. Furthermore, Dinther et al. (2011) explored the association between education and self-efficacy. The study revealed that self-efficacy is related to a variety of things, including the strategies people use, the goals they set for themselves, and their academic success. In other words, improved self-efficacy is connected with what most people worldwide consider healthy student life practices.

To better understand the factors associated with older adult learners in the Organizational Leadership degree program, the first research question: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program? was posed. Regarding this research question, the findings from the case study confirmed and extended the existing knowledge in the field of education because all participants cited motivation as a determining factor in their decision to enter for the first time or return to college. All four themes, program and degree, instructor influence, technology and online learning, and experiences and needs of the adult learner, emerged from research question one.

A reoccurring response from participants was the understanding that hard work, focus, motivation, sacrifice, and determination are all key components of the process. These determining factors have a direct correlation with the literature. Because adult learners are in a different stage of life, their self-determination drives them to accomplish their goals. In this situation, the adult learner's vision is to complete a college education (Kapur, 2015). Additionally, external considerations, such as having a family, children, or demanding careers, influenced their motivation and success in a course (Park & Choi, 2009). In the past, ten of the

twelve participants viewed online learning as a challenge. The importance of instructor comments and support was emphasized by all participants, even those who acknowledged to having limited computer literacy skills. In contrast, each participant stated that instructors should take the time to examine how to best incorporate the instructor influence theme highlighted in this study into their courses, which could contribute to the academic motivation and success of online students as a whole.

According to the majority of interviewees, several factors surrounding the recent COVID-19 pandemic substantially impacted their educational and personal lives. The majority of participants reported uncertainty in managing school obligations, working from home or having to continue to physically report to work, and caring for family members. These factors greatly contributed to the level of difficulty in achieving academic success. One participant, Serena, transparently shared her grief when recalling the effects of the recent pandemic on her as a whole:

I know COVID turned the world upside down but it took things to a whole new level for me. I experienced so many losses. During this awful time, I lost my mom, my sister, my son and my dog. Both my husband and I got COVID during that initial phase but fortunately we survived. It was also during this time that I was forced to leave my job. I had to pull myself up by the boot straps. With the help of God and my husband, I knew quitting school was not an option. I decided to earn this degree for everyone I lost. No matter how long it takes. I will do it in memory of them.

Like Serena, all interviewees emphasized the necessity to persevere, even if it meant temporarily reducing the number of classes they were taking. The motivation variable, per Armstrong-Mensah, Ramsey-White, Yankey, and Self-Brown (2020), concentrated on students'

capacity to turn in assignments on time, remember to log in to take quizzes, communicate with other classmates about class assignments, and be able to set aside time to complete their academic work. The economic and behavioral variable concentrated on students' worries about contracting COVID-19 themselves or their family members, how the pandemic would affect their careers (if employed), their financial security, and how the pandemic would generally affect them their daily lives.

Further theoretical framework connections were identified through research question 2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in a technology-enhanced degree program? By making connections between new and old knowledge, learners are able to build their own understanding, according to the constructivist principles of education and learning (Driscoll, 2000). According to Von Glasersfeld (1995), learning is affected by both the situation in which a concept is taught and the learner's prior knowledge and expectations. In addition, Constructivism is a psychological theory of learning that describes the process of education and knowledge development (Von Glasersfeld, 1995). Therefore, it has immediate implications for teaching (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). Learners are constantly refining their representation of the world in their heads depending on their experiences. As they take in each new piece of information, learners revise their mental models accordingly and build their understanding. To add, constructivism is an idea about how people learn that is grounded in observation and scientific inquiry (Holzer, 1994). It proposes that people learn about the world through their experiences and observations of physical objects (Bereiter, 1994). According to this view, humans derive knowledge and meaning from their experiences.

The literature and these findings suggest that adult learners bring a variety of life experiences to higher education and have changing learning demands concerning societal norms.

These learners are willing to engage in self-directed learning experiences, identify andragogy approaches in higher education, are keen to solve problems, and are highly driven (Merriam, 2003). However, much more needs to be done, in accordance with the literature, to assess further and better direct the learning experiences for this set of learners. Merriam's (2003) self-directed learning view of adult learning is guided by Henschke's (2016) view on the growth of andragogy within adult learning approaches and Knowles et al.'s (2012) perspective on the whole of adult learning as a lifetime learning process. Merriam's (2012) perspective on andragogy and self-directed learning stated that adult learners are intrinsically motivated, bring prior life experiences to higher learning, and are eager to apply that knowledge in problem solving, and that educators' role is to support and guide the learner in andragogy and self-directed learning approaches.

Older adult learners encounter numerous social, economic, and family issues while they pursue higher education. "We are independent. But it doesn't mean we don't need direction and help", as Doris, one of the participants, put it. Understanding andragogy and self-directed learning in adult learners can help instructors improve this population's higher learner experiences.

Higher education administrators and faculty can help students direct their problem-based learning (Abraham et al., 2016). Recognizing the learner's needs and using andragogy-based adult learning ideas is the first step in improving the older adult learner's higher learning experiences (Queen, 2015). Educators must use adult learners' information to lead and steer andragogy techniques that satisfy course learning objectives while supporting adult learners (Merriam, 2003). These learners must be regarded as valuable collaborators in the educational process by higher education systems (Cai et al., 2018). Frank made the following statement

about his educational goals, “I may not know everything but I do know a lot and I know that I want some input into my own education”.

Moreover, this study aimed to investigate the motivating factors and needs that influence older adult learners' decisions to enroll in and complete an online degree in Organizational Leadership via the University System of Georgia eMajor collaborative. In addition, the current study sought to investigate the perceptions of older adult learners toward technology use. It is hoped that this work will serve as a foundation for future research (Williams & Moser, 2019). Future research should examine the more significant dynamics of midlife learners pursuing higher education. Future research should look at gender, undergraduate versus graduate-level learners, and educational institutions with specific programs for midlife learners.

According to Cotterill (2015), because midlife learners experience family life problems, strategies for addressing teaching and learning needs must be intentional and specialized. Participants in this study indicated how educators might target the learner's teaching and learning requirements consciously and specifically. Participants also discussed how educators might be purposeful in their involvement in the lives of midlife learners. Both educators and students will benefit from this involvement.

Limitations of the Study

Even though the current study is extensive and delves into twelve older adult learners' motivations, needs, and experiences, there are existing research limitations (Creswell, 2012). This study analyzed and described the experiences of older adult online learners who volunteered to participate. Second, the experiences of older adult learners were not compared to those of their traditional counterparts. Third, due to the qualitative aspect of the study, the sample size of undergraduate students was modest. Lastly, the study's findings were limited to older adult

learners enrolled in a single online degree program at three collaborative partner institutions. The study did not include all older adult students enrolled in other degrees at all partner universities. This study provides insight into the motivating reasons, requirements, and experiences of older adult learners in one USG eCampus online collaboration program, despite its limits and restrictions. Moreover, because the procedure was credible, transparent, and saturated with meaningful information from the twelve participants, these limitations did not affect the quality of the data collected or the data analysis procedures Creswell (2012).

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study's findings unmistakably show that changes must be made in how institutions recognize and address the needs of older adult learners. There must also be cognizance of the challenges older adult learners encounter when applying to and reentering higher education and the obstacles these learners face when navigating learning management systems. Additional studies may include the following five recommendations:

Table 10

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendation 1	Future research may include a follow-up component to the current study to determine if the participants completed their degree programs and to learn about their experiences post-program completion.
Recommendation 2	Since this study only included older adult learners from three partner institutions majoring in Organizational Leadership, future research may consider analyzing and including older adult learners enrolled in each eMajor online degree program and partner institution.
Recommendation 3	Future research could also employ a quantitative research method to compare older adult learners' success and attrition rates to those of their traditional peers. The researcher will determine if each group's motivating factors and needs differ.
Recommendation 4	It is essential to investigate the current policies and practices further to ascertain how institutions may modify, enhance, and practice beneficial adult learner strategies for curriculum, resources, and services.
Recommendation 5	Future research may develop a model specific to this demographic and combine components of the theoretical frameworks from this study, self-efficacy and constructivism, to better explain and support older adults' experiences and needs in their online degree program.

Implications of the Study

The implications of these findings revealed that older adult learners chose to enroll and persist in an online degree program out of convenience, flexibility, and the need to finish what they had begun without considering all of the additional requirements and demands of an online program (Geiger et al., 2014). The older online learners mainly believed that some or limited technological abilities coupled with efficient time management skills to measure their preparation for an online degree program. The participants were unaware of the many skill sets required to complete coursework and the degree program (Duncan-Howell, 2012).

One of the study's themes found that the participants had a false sense of confidence before beginning the course. Being somewhat computer literate and having the desire to participate translated to success in an online course. Most participants recognized early on that there was a learning curve associated with the learning management system alone. There was a

need to “figure it out,” which resulted in a delay in contacting the technical support or the instructor for assistance. Many of these online learners enrolled in the degree program for flexibility and convenience, often without being adequately advised (Nitecki, 2011), resulting in difficulties. According to Faulconer et al. (2013) and Varney (2013), aiding students before their problems became insurmountable was crucial to student success. Varney (2013) revealed that early assistance and monitoring the first symptoms of trouble were essential to students' success.

Dissemination of the Findings

The results of this study will be published by ProQuest and the Columbus State University ePress. The findings may also interest the editors of the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration (OJDLA). OJDLA publishes articles quarterly, and the researcher intends to submit an article summarizing the findings of this research for publication consideration.

Conclusion

The summary of the current study, analysis of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, implications of the current research study, and the dissemination of the findings were all provided in Chapter Five. The impacts of the participants' responses were detailed and linked to each research question based on semi-structured interviews, as were the themes that emerged from their responses. Recommendations were carefully made based on the themes that emerged from this research. Because many of the themes were commonly known, the importance of each theme and its relation to the body of literature, relative to the motivating factors, needs, and experiences of older adult learners in an online degree program and the perceptions of technology use, added to the body of literature. Future research will focus on challenges and responses that were not addressed in this study but

should be in future studies. Furthermore, future research on older online adult learners could be decisive in advancing higher education services provided to this age demographic (Bresnick, 2021).

More effort may be made to assist older adult learners by developing online settings that enable connectivity and involvement, thereby establishing a sense of true community in an online learning space. More comprehensive and effective technological instruction and support will also allow these older adult learners to concentrate on their studies rather than technology.

The purpose of this dissertation was to reveal the motivators and needs that influence older adult learners' decisions to enroll in and complete an online degree in Organizational Leadership through the University System of Georgia eMajor collaborative. In addition, the current study sought to better understand the older adult learners' attitudes toward technology use in an online degree program. Through the semi-structured interviews, this research project delved into the lives of twelve participants, all of whom candidly shared their experiences as older adult learners in an online degree setting with the researcher. In turn, the researcher was given the privilege of converting their stories into an understanding of what they had experienced, which was presented in this study. In the end, these findings added to the collective knowledge of the education field about this age demographic's experiences.

In summary, as older adult learners, the researcher became more cognizant of what it was like for these participants to balance multiple life roles, such as careers, families, and civic and social involvement. Likewise, the researcher and the participants shared other qualities such as desire, perseverance, purpose, and determination when obtaining an online degree despite technological obstacles and personal responsibilities. These revelations paved the way for investigating a fresh perspective on understanding the experiences of older adult learners

pursuing an online degree. While exploring her participants' lived experiences and perceptions, the researcher could reflect on her own experiences and perceptions and come to a new understanding of her journey as an older adult learner. This understanding, which had previously been hidden in the recesses of her consciousness, is now fully revealed because her perception of the world of online learning for older adults has been expanded to include new possibilities and meanings. As a result, the current study successfully provided insights into the motivating factors and needs that influence the decisions of older adult learners to enroll and persist in one University System of Georgia eMajor collaborative program.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University

Date: 9/2/2022

Protocol Number: 23-005

Protocol Title: A Case Study Exploring the Motivating Factors and Needs that Influence Older Adult Learners' Decisions to Enroll and Persist in One University System of Georgia eMajor Collaborative Program

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Hayes Stewart

Co-Principal Investigator: Jennifer Lovelace

Dear Jennifer Hayes Stewart:

The Columbus State University Institutional Review Board or representative(s) has reviewed your research proposal identified above. It has been determined that the project is classified as exempt under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations and has been approved. You may begin your research project immediately.

Please note any changes to the protocol must be submitted, using a Project Modification form, to the IRB before implementing the change(s). Any adverse events, unexpected problems, and/or incidents that involve risks to participants and/or others must be reported to the Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu or (706) 507-8634.

If you have further questions, please feel free to contact the IRB.

Sincerely,

Sammy Kanso, Graduate Assistant

Institutional Review Board
Columbus State University

*** Please note that the IRB is closed during holidays, breaks, or other times when the IRB faculty or staff are not available. Visit the **IRB Scheduled Meetings** page on the IRB website for a list of upcoming closures. ***

Appendix B

Preliminary Request for Participation

Greetings [Prospective Participant Name],

I am a doctoral candidate at Columbus State University seeking to earn a degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. As your academic advisor, I believe you would make an excellent addition to my research project.

I am doing a qualitative study (interviews) to explore the motivating factors that influenced your decision to seek an online degree in Organizational Leadership through the USG eMajor program. The interview will take approximately one hour and be held virtually via Zoom. I am emailing to ask if you would be willing to participate.

I hope you will accept this invitation to participate, as your responses could help gain more information about older adult learners in on line degree programs. If you choose to participate in the study, you will receive compensation of a \$10 Amazon e-gift card via email.

I sincerely appreciate you taking the time to read this email and consider participating in this study. If you have any questions, please email me at hayesstewart_jennifer@columbusstate.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. Jennifer Lovelace, at lovelacejennifer@columbusstate.edu. Thank you again [Prospective Participant's Name] for your time and consideration, and have a great day!

Best,

Jennifer Hayes Stewart
Doctoral Candidate
Columbus State University
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Teacher Education, Leadership, and Counseling
Phone:678-839-6378
Email: hayesstewart_jennifer@columbusstate.edu

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Informed Consent Form

You are being asked to participate in a research project conducted by Jennifer Hayes Stewart, a doctoral student in the Department of Teacher Education, Leadership, and Counseling at Columbus State University. The faculty member supervising the study is Jennifer M. Lovelace, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Higher Education/Director, Doctoral Programs.

I. Purpose:

The purpose of this project is to investigate older adult learners' attitudes toward technology use, as well as their motivation, needs, and experiences while enrolled in the University System of Georgia's (USG) eMajor online Organizational Leadership undergraduate degree program. The research will focus on what motivates students to enroll and progress in the degree program and understand their current technological abilities relative to online learning management systems. The case study will also seek to understand the older adult learner's needs and the effect online learning has on student attrition for this population.

II. Procedures:

Your participation in this research case study will involve an interview conducted and recorded via Zoom. The interview will be performed in a setting, time, and day of your choosing and convenience. The questions will be open-ended and will focus on your personal experiences as an older adult learner in an online degree program. The interview will likely last approximately 60 minutes. After the interview, you will be emailed a copy of the transcript. You will be asked to review the transcript to confirm that the researcher has accurately captured your thoughts and perceptions, that the meaning of your responses has been conveyed, and that truthful and accurate information has been reported. You will be permitted to provide any additional information after having reflected. This is the moment for you to make any deletions, modifications, or additions to your transcript in order to better explain your comments. You will be given five days from the date the transcript is emailed back to you after the interview, to complete your reflection and conduct a final review of your transcript. Once all changes have been completed, you will email the researcher the annotated copy within the same five day period. The total time required of you to participate in this study, including scheduling and participating in the interview and completing your transcript review and reflection, will be a maximum of 30 days. The information gathered for this study will only be used for the dissertation publication and associated presentations. The results from this study may be used for future research projects.

III. Possible Risks or Discomforts:

There are no anticipated physical, psychological, social or economic, use of deceptive technique, legal or financial risks to the participants during the interview process. However, if you experience anxiety or discomfort related to the interview process, you will be able to take a break if needed. If you begin to experience distress as a result of the interview process, information on counseling services on your campus will be provided.

IV. Potential Benefits:

There will be no potential benefits to the participants.

V. Costs and Compensation:

While participation in this study is voluntary, you will receive a \$10 Amazon electronic gift card as compensation for your time. Upon completing the interview, you will receive the card electronically to your email address.

VI. Confidentiality:

Your responses to the interview questions will be kept confidential and at no time will your actual identity be revealed. You will be assigned a pseudonym to correlate with your responses. Any professional staff member who assists me with transcription of your responses will only know you by your pseudonym. All documents (i.e. transcripts, field notes, informed consent forms, participant confirmation emails) and video recordings will be kept in a secure office with keyed access, on a password protected computer and will only be accessible by the researcher. Once transcripts have been approved (using only pseudonyms) by the participant, the video recording will be deleted from the researcher's computer immediately. The remaining documents will remain on the researcher's password protected computer for a period of five years. After five years, the additional documents will be permanently deleted.

VII. Withdrawal:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time, and your withdrawal will not involve penalty or loss of benefits. For additional information about this research project, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Jennifer Hayes Stewart at 678-839-6378 or hayesstewart jennifer@columbusstate.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Columbus State University Institutional Review Board at irb@columbusstate.edu.

I have read this informed consent form. If I had any questions, they have been answered. By signing this form, I agree to participate in this research project.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

Appendix D

Follow Up/Reminder Email

Greetings [Prospective Participant Name],

I am a doctoral candidate at Columbus State University seeking to earn a degree in Curriculum and Instruction with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. As your academic advisor, I believe you would make an excellent addition to my research project.

I am doing a qualitative study (interviews) to explore the motivating factors that influenced your decision to seek an online degree in Organizational Leadership through the USG eMajor program. The interview will take approximately one hour and be held virtually via Zoom.

I am emailing you as a reminder to ask if you would be willing to participate. If you choose to participate in the study, you will receive compensation of a \$10 Amazon e-gift card via email once the interview has been completed.

If you have any questions, please email me at hayesstewartjennifer@columbusstate.edu or my dissertation chair, Dr. Jennifer Lovelace, at lovelacejennifer@columbusstate.edu.

Thank you again [Prospective Participant's Name] for your time and consideration. Have a great day!

Best,

Jennifer Hayes Stewart

Doctoral Candidate

Columbus State University

College of Education and Health Professions

Department of Teacher Education, Leadership, and Counseling

Phone:678-839-6378

Email: [hayesstewart __jennifer@columbusstate.edu](mailto:hayesstewart__jennifer@columbusstate.edu)

Appendix E

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

The basis of this research will involve exploring the motivating factors that influenced your decision to seek an online degree in Organizational Leadership through the USG eMajor program.

1. Will you please provide some background information about you and your career?
2. What factors contributed to your decision to consider an online undergraduate degree program?
3. Please describe the process you used to compare online versus face-to-face degree programs.
4. What process did you use to locate the institution you would attend?
5. Not only are your courses taught online, but everything associated with college is done online, from applying to your institution, applying for financial aid, paying your tuition, and registering for classes. Please describe that process.
6. How difficult was it to find the program that you selected?
7. How did you discover USG eMajor online degree programs?
8. How important was receiving support from the USG eMajor staff to your decision to seek an online degree?
9. What attracted you to the Organizational Leadership program?
10. How do you feel a degree in Organizational Leadership will benefit you, personally and professionally?
11. Since this is a 100% online program with a non-traditional, face-to-face taught curriculum, what were your feelings about accessing your classes online?
12. Share your experiences with navigating the online classes.
13. Have you developed relationships with other students in your program? If so, how have they helped you in the online process of learning?
14. Please describe your interactions with your professors.

15. How would you describe your current knowledge and experience with technology and online learning compared with when you began the program?
16. Regarding your course work, was there a particular project or assignment that may have contributed to you re-evaluating your decision to return to school?
17. What aspects of the program are helping you be successful in earning your degree?
18. What types of support services are in place to help older adult learners?
19. Do you have anything else to add that you feel may be significant that was not previously asked?

Appendix F

Semi-Structured Interview Guide/Protocol

Research Project: A Case Study Exploring the Motivating Factors and Needs that Influence Older Adult Learners' Decisions to Enroll and Persist in One University System of Georgia eMajor Collaborative Program

Purpose of the study: This research project aims to examine how older adult learners perceive the use of technology in higher education to increase academic achievement, learning comprehension, and course tasks.

The research questions for this study:

- RQ1: How does motivation affect older adult learners' persistence in a technology-driven online degree program?
- RQ2: How do older adult online learners describe their experiences and needs in an technology-enhanced degree program?

Date:

Time of Interview:

Location:

Participant Identifier/Pseudonym:

Greeting and Introduction:

Hello (Interview participant) and thank you for agreeing to participate in this informal Zoom interview. My name is Jennifer Stewart and I currently serve as the Academic Advisor for eCampus/eMajor Organizational Leadership program at <participant's institution>. I am also a doctoral student at Columbus State University, Columbus, Georgia.

The purpose of this study aims to examine how older adult learners perceive the use of technology in higher education to increase academic achievement, learning comprehension, and course tasks. Your input is very valuable. It will help higher education administrators and leaders better understand the needs and motivators of older adult learners and how to better support these learners in an online environment.

To that end, are you ready to proceed with the interview questions?

- **If yes, continue below.**
- If no, but the participant is still interested in participating, determine a better time to reschedule their interview.
- If no, thank them for their time.

Awesome and once again, thank you. You have already provided a written and signed consent to participate in this interview and study. For your reference, I will need to record our conversation today so that I can accurately capture your responses for review at a later time. Although the findings of this study may be published, no information that can identify you will be included; your responses will remain confidential and this information will not be given to anyone not involved in the study.

In the interview, I will ask you a series of 19 questions. I may extend the questions to gain additional detail based on your responses. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes, possibly less again based on your responses. To show my appreciation for your participation today, you will receive a \$10 Amazon gift card for your participation.

Your participation in the interview is voluntary. Risks involved in the study are minimal. You may experience some emotional discomfort from answering certain questions but you can discontinue your involvement in the interview at any time during the telephone conversation. You will also be free to decline to answer any particular question you do not wish to answer. No service of any kind, to which you are otherwise entitled, will be lost or jeopardized if you choose to “not participate” in the study or if your responses are less than complementary of your academic program.

Finally, I shared some contact information with you in my original email invitation and encourage you to contact me or my dissertation chair, Dr. Jennifer Lovelace, with any questions or concerns you have regarding the study.

Do you have any questions?

Do you agree to participate in this study? If so, please answer “yes” so that your verbal consent may be recorded. Again, thank you.

Yes: Document oral consent and continue with interview.

_____ Researcher’s initials indicate that the participant provided verbal consent to proceed with the interview.

No: Thank them for their time.

Interview Questions:

1. Will you please provide some background information about you and your career?
2. What factors contributed to your decision to consider an online undergraduate degree program?
3. Please describe the process you used to compare online versus face-to-face degree programs.
4. What process did you use to locate the institution you would attend?

5. Not only are your courses taught online, but everything associated with college is done online, from applying to your institution, applying for financial aid, paying your tuition, and registering for classes. Please describe that process.
6. How difficult was it to find the program that you selected?
7. How did you discover USG eMajor online degree programs?
8. How important was receiving support from the USG eMajor staff to your decision to seek an online degree?
9. What attracted you to the Organizational Leadership program?
10. How do you feel a degree in Organizational Leadership will benefit you, personally and professionally?
11. Since this is a 100% online program with a non-traditional, face-to-face taught curriculum, what were your feelings about accessing your classes online?
12. Share your experiences with navigating the online classes.
13. Have you developed relationships with other students in your program? If so, how have they helped you in the online process of learning?
14. Please describe your interactions with your professors.
15. How would you describe your current knowledge and experience with technology and online learning compared with when you began the program?
16. Regarding your course work, was there a particular project or assignment that may have contributed to you re-evaluating your decision to return to school?
17. What aspects of the program are helping you be successful in earning your degree?
18. What types of support services are in place to help older adult learners?
19. Do you have anything else to add that you feel may be significant that was not previously asked?

Thank you for your participation in the interview. Again, please contact me directly by email or by phone if you would like to share any additional information or if you have any questions. I also encourage you to contact my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Lovelace, with any questions or concerns you have about the study.

I will be forwarding your gift card by mail or electronically. If you would prefer to receive your gift card by mail, would you please provide me with your current mailing address?

Address:

Thank you again and enjoy your day.

Appendix G

Confirmation Email

Greetings [Participant Name],

This email serves as confirmation of your agreement to participate in my qualitative study. The interview has been scheduled for the following date and time based on the information you provided:

Participant Name:

Interview Date:

Interview Time:

If you have any questions or need to change your interview time, please contact me using the information provided below. A Zoom invitation will be sent in a separate email.

Thank you for your participation,

Jennifer Hayes Stewart

Doctoral Candidate

Columbus State University

College of Education and Health Professions

Department of Teacher Education, Leadership, and Counseling

Phone:678-839-6378

Email: hayesstewart _jennifer@columbusstate.edu

Appendix H:

Thank You Email

Greetings [Participant Name],

Please accept this email as a special thank you for your participation in my qualitative study. Attached is the transcript for your interview. Please review it carefully to be sure your responses were properly captured.

Also as promised, once I receive confirmation that your interview is accurate, I will promptly email your \$10 Amazon eGift card.

If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact me using the information provided below.

Thank you again for your participation,

Jennifer Hayes Stewart
Doctoral Candidate
Columbus State University
College of Education and Health Professions
Department of Teacher Education, Leadership, and Counseling
Phone:678-839-6378
Email: hayesstewart_jennifer@columbusstate.edu