Persisting to completion: Experiences of adult minority women in online programs

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Abstract: The explosion of online education has greatly increased adult students' decision to enroll in online courses. This can lead to low retention, issues with persistence, and decreased graduation rates. Using an interpretive qualitative methodology, this study examined the experiences of minority women that graduated from an online master's degree. Findings highlighted the complex social, emotional, environmental, and academic factors adult students could experience in learning online. Five themes emerged from the data analysis, which focused on (1) the overall program features and how they affected minority women persistence in the online program; (2) how self-motivation and purpose to achieve a goal contributed to persistence; (3) how course design and creation of a sense of community throughout the program helped them persist; (4) course strategies that allowed for immediate application of learning; and (5) human and institutional support that influenced program completion. Study concludes with contributions and implications to higher education and adult learning and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: minority women, persistence, online learning, higher education

The proliferation of online course delivery has greatly increased adult students' decision to enroll in online education courses and programs in higher education; however, in many instances this mode of course delivery has been found to be problematic because of low retention, persistence, and graduation rates (Allen & Seaman, 2011). For example, for adult minority students regardless of their academic standing, research shows that they are often underprepared for online learning (Okwumabua et al., 2011).

One of the major challenges adult online learners face is how much time and effort they are able to put in their courses and degree programs. In attempting to probe these issues, many studies have focused on the nature, shape, and depth of online learning. At the same time, studying subgroups of adult minority learners has been virtually ignored. No two students are influenced by precisely the same teaching and learning methods. Each individual experience is a unique process. Still, women from minority backgrounds can share learning experiences. This means that they tend to develop similar techniques of learning. Other types of participation that affect success in online degree completion require high initiative. Some high initiative activities are associated with academic preparation, sense of significance for the class, and support services in academic programs (Mina, 2006).

Whatever their roots, the characteristics of online adult students' experiences clearly have a significant effect on their success or failure. This study attempted to fill this gap by addressing how minority women who completed an online master's degree program described their experiences as well as what course design strategies appealed to them most. Additionally, the focus was on the learning strategies they employed and what support mechanism they used.

Literature Review

A literature review was conducted ranging from 2005 to 2019 of peer-reviewed articles and dissertations in databases such as ERIC, ProQuest, Education Complete, and government reports. Key terms used include "online programs," "course design," "online learning environment," "online support," "persistence strategies," "women of color," and "graduate online programs." The literature review revealed themes related to satisfaction and persistence to online learning, online student support, and graduate online programs and minority students in higher education. Three major themes related to this study emerged from the literature review:

factors influencing satisfaction and persistence to online learning, online student support services that affect persistence, and graduate online programs and minority students in higher education.

Factors Influencing Satisfaction and Persistence to Online Learning

The traditional model of education witnessed a massive change toward lifelong learning that provides learning opportunities to adult learners taking into consideration their multiple work and social commitments (Gopalan, Goodman, Hardy, & Jacobs, 2019; Sweet & Moen, 2007).

Previous research addressed the frequent decline of online learning compared with on-campus learning (Boston et al., 2011; Cochran, Campbell et al., 2014). However, recent research shows that online learning has been continually growing to meet the demands of learners who seek academic degrees that do not conflict with their several life obligations (Budash, 2015).

Satisfaction and persistence in the online environment are critical to enhance adult learners' completion of online programs. According to a quantitative study conducted in an online university in South Korea, Joo et al. (2011) concluded that the learners' accessibility of online learning materials, usefulness of technology, and social and cognitive presence contributed to their persistence. Similarly, Jung and Lee (2018) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the factors that facilitated learners' perseverance and engagement in massive open online courses (MOOCs) in South Korea. The results showed that teaching presence, effectiveness of learning tools, usefulness of technology, and accessibility of materials taught had direct impact on learners' persistence. Similarly, in a qualitative study, Snyder (2014) acknowledged the positive impacts of student engagement, faculty presence, communication, social integration, and motivation to completion on online student success.

Online course structure and presentation have proved their effectiveness in promoting students' interaction and success (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). By developing an online course assessment to investigate the impact of course design on online students' performance, Jaggars and Xu (2016) highlighted four rubrics that determined the success of an online course design: (1) well-planned and accessible courses help students explore course structure and promote their navigation throughout the course components; (2) setting course objectives, outcomes, and the transparent grading system facilitate students' learning; (3) interpersonal interaction with instructor and colleagues; and (4) the availability and convenience of technology all support online learners' success and enhance their sense of community (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Moore,

2013). However, Knowles and Kerkman (2007) projected that even though the online environment offered rich student material interaction, instructor-student communication failed to enhance interpersonal interactions. In a more recent study, Butz and Stupnisky (2017) showed that online discussion enhanced students' relatedness and created a strong sense of community. Likewise, Luo et al. (2017) in a quantitative study where they conducted a survey of 643 online students, concluded that online collaboration and interaction among students and their instructors reinforced their sense of community and supported their success.

Online Student Support Services That Affect Persistence

Student support services (SSS) for online learners provide a spectrum of services that enhance adult learning. Financial aid, counseling, tutoring, and career services are examples of services presented to learners to foster their success in the cyber environment (Nsamba & Makoe, 2017). Despite the availability of these services, some online students are not aware of them for several reasons. Russo-Gleicher (2013) conducted a qualitative study to explore the contribution of SSS to support and retain online students. She concluded that students were not referred to these services by their instructors for two reasons: (1) instructors were not aware of these services or (2) instructors did not believe in employing these services to support their learners.

In a study conducted by Lehman and Conceição (2014), the three types of support online students reported that helped them achieve their academic goals are human resources, institutional, and self-care. Communication with instructors, other students, friends, and family members were means to stay motivated (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Jung & Lee, 2018). Institutional support encompasses services offered to online students to facilitate their learning. Providing quick technical solutions using online services such as the online library and the help desk are examples of campus support that most online students reported their remarkable effect on their persistence (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Read & Morasch, 2016). Since online students are usually aware of the potential hindrances that might impede their progress, they take actions to help them keep motivated by allocating time to family, friends, and exercise as means of self-care (Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

Graduate Online Programs and Minority Students in Higher Education

A survey conducted by the Babson Survey Research Group (2015) and co-sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium reported a significant increase of online courses enrollment in

2014. For example, more than one in four students (28%) had taken at least one online course and in Fall 2014, 2.85 million distance education students took all their courses online. Adult learners were motivated to enroll in these programs due to their accessibility and flexibility.

Several reasons encourage students to take online courses or enroll in online degree programs. Online graduate programs allow many students to further their educational pursuits regardless their location, social obligations, and work commitments (McArthur, 2016). Surprisingly, a study conducted by Verdinelli and Kutner (2016) concluded that students with disabilities favor online courses to avoid possible discriminatory behaviors they might be exposed to in traditional classes.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2018) reported an increase of enrollment among minority students in post-secondary institutions in the period between 1976 and 2015. The Hispanic students' percentage increased from 4% to 17%, and African American students from 10% to 14% in the same period, whereas the percentage of increase among American Indian/Alaska Native was only 0.1%, from 0.7% to 0.8%. These numbers, however, reflect enrollment in higher postsecondary institutions regardless the method of learning, not comparing on-campus vs. online. Thus, there is a need to explore the enrollment numbers and the experiences of minority students in online programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of adult minority women that helped them persist and complete an online master's degree program.

Conceptual Framework

This study used the Persistence Model for Online Student Retention (Lehman & Conceição, 2014) as the conceptual framework (see Figure 1). This model focuses on students' perceptions of how they proceed through an online course and provides a context for the online learning experience and how they are supported while taking online courses.

The Persistence Model for Online Student Retention includes three categories of strategies: design, student, and support. The design strategies encompass the design methods for incorporating intrinsic and extrinsic motivators into the online course. The student strategies are the pathway followed as they progress through the online learning experience. The support strategies include the tools to help students satisfy their academic and personal needs (Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

Figure 1

Persistence Model for Online Student Retention.
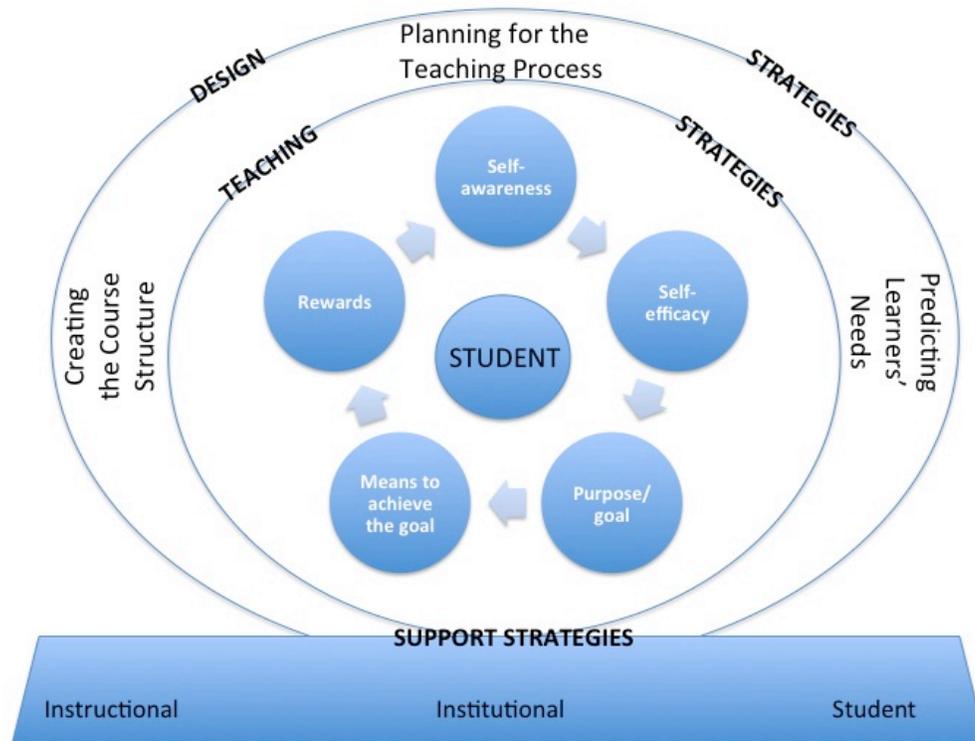
Note. From *Motivating and Retaining Online Students: Research-Based Strategies That Work* (p.88), by R. M. Lehman and S. C. O. Conceição, 2014, Jossey-Bass. Copyright 2014 by R. M. Lehman and S. C. O. Conceição. Reprinted with permission.

The design strategies are located in the outside circle and indicate the online learning environment, the planning for the teaching process, and the elements that predict the learners' needs. An effective learning environment is created using consistency, variety, relevance, and content prioritization to help students stay motivated throughout the course. Planning for the teaching process includes setting up clear expectations, personalizing the interactions, and incorporating feedback for the part of the instructor throughout the course. An instructor can predict learners' needs by identifying the students' skills and abilities, academic preparation for taking an online course, and access to resources (Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

The student strategies are located in the centered of the model and indicate the pathway students follow as they progress through the online learning experience. This pathway moves the student from awareness of self, situation, and consequences; progresses to self-efficacy; goes

on to the identification of a purpose or goal(s) to take an online course (intrinsic motivation); moves to strategies to achieve the goal(s) (time management, prioritizing, and learning strategies); and finally rewards after achieving the goal(s) (extrinsic incentives). The pathway is part of a cyclical process that is experienced from online course to online course.

The support strategies provide the needed assistance to prepare students for the online learning experience and are located at the bottom of the model as a foundation for students to have a sense of control over their learning (instructional support), providing an environment conducive to learning (institutional support), and supplying tools for self-reflection and self-awareness (student self-care). Support involves paying attention to students' needs, which vary depending on the characteristics and experience of the students. Instructional support sets the framework for the course exchanges; institutional support makes the course accessible and shows a student-centered design. Self-care resources can help students integrate mental, physical, and regular habits of self-care while taking the online course, which can benefit the learning process (Lehman & Conceição, 2014).

Methodology

This study used an interpretive qualitative methodology to examine the experiences of adult minority women to identify strategies that helped them persist and complete an online master's degree program. The Persistence Model for Online Student Retention was used to develop the interview questions and set the context of the online learning environment. Interview questions focused on the appeal of the course design strategies, expectations of online teaching, and learning and support strategies employed by participants. The major research question for this study was: What were the experiences of minority women during an online master's degree program that helped them persist and complete the program? Sub-questions included:

- What course design strategies did appeal the most for them?
- What learning strategies did they employ?
- What support strategies did they use?

Data Collection

Nine semi-structured interviews with self-identified minority women were conducted in-person, via telephone, or via web conferencing software by three researchers. Participants were

recruited via an email message to alumni of an institution in the Midwest of the United States, social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) posts, and word of mouth (snowball). The recruitment message included a short demographic questionnaire (name, email, race, graduation date, institution, online program, and gender) to identify qualified participants.

The goal was to recruit adult minority women who had graduated from an online master's degree program within a period of up to three years, so that recollections about their experiences would be fresh. One of the limitations of this study was to recruit adult minority participants who had completed an online master's degree. The list of graduates qualifying for the study was small, with a total of two years attempting to recruit participants. Messages to potential participants were sent out until data saturation was reached. The nine participants included five African-American women and four Hispanic women from education and library and information science.

Data Analysis

This study used the constant comparative analysis method to data analysis, which focused on comparing incidents to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories (Creswell, 2007). The aim was to use the transcripts of interviews to explore emerging incidents and categories related to persistence to completion in an online master's degree program. Coding of data involved looking for themes and patterns based on our research questions and conceptual framework. Because there were three researchers looking at the data, cross-examination of the findings allowed for triangulation of the data.

Data were grouped into themes. No names were linked to the data. A detailed account of the participants' experiences as a group is provided. This account describes their perceptions and expectations of the online environment, learning, and support strategies used during their tenure in the online program. The purpose of providing a thick description was to bring the perceptions of the participants before the readers, so that the readers can naturalistically generalize their experiences to those that have been captured in the study (Denzin, 1989). Thick description contextualizes the participants' experiences representing their trajectory in online learning. To minimize the influence of the researchers' judgment over the study, two strategies were used: (a) the use of a confirmability audit to trace the data to their original sources and (b) the process of synthesizing data to reach conclusions that can be confirmed. Peer review of transcripts was employed to determine if the data supported the conclusions.

Findings

Five major themes emerged from the data analysis. Themes focused on (1) the overall program features and how they affected minority women persistence in the online program; (2) how self-motivation and purpose to achieve a goal contributed to persistence; (3) how course design and creation of a sense of community throughout the program helped them persist; (4) course strategies that allowed for immediate application of learning; and (5) human and institutional support that influenced program completion.

Overall Program Features Affecting Minority Women's Persistence

All nine participants emphasized that the features of the online program met their busy life requirements. The convenience of accessing online courses, flexibility of the program, and affordability all contributed to help them have a successful and fulfilling online experience.

Easy access to online courses was one of the factors that encouraged one of the participants to complete her online degree program. She said, "It was not complicated, you can get there, you can navigate all materials." Another participant reported, "I liked it. It was very easy to navigate. I did not have any issues even with my class." Access to online courses at their own pace also influenced their ability to complete the program. One participant stated, "Without the online courses, there is no way for the work to be done. I spent a [certain] amount of time on these courses to meet the normal expectations. They were appealing to me."

All participants were workingwomen. Therefore, the online program provided them the opportunity to pursue their education without the need to either quit their jobs or abandon their family responsibilities. One participant revealed: "I really enjoyed the fact that I [could] schedule the courses mainly around my own life. I was already working full time."

Convenience gave participants a feeling of being self-directed and able to complete tasks, as this participant shared: "I can do everything technically by myself because I have everything available [to] me." Another participant felt that the program design aligned well with her work and life commitments:

> Overall, I liked the aspects, the convenience, for example…I used to travel a lot. I stayed away for three months. So, if I were in…a physical school, I [wouldn't] be able to go to class every day or once a week…. I liked it because the fact it was convenient, and I can get my work done through the Internet.

In some programs, online students may not pay segregated fees. Therefore, the cost of the online courses is less than on-campus courses, which makes the online program more appealing and affordable to working adult learners who look for reasonable education fees. One of the participants explained how the cost affected her ability to continue her studies online: "I just moved to [location] and as a non-resident [was] the only way I could really pay the tuition."

All participants in this study underscored the flexibility of the online program that provided them the opportunity to pursue their education without the need to quit their jobs or be on campus, which would consume a lot of time and effort. The online courses provided the flexibility of working from home as this participant emphasized:

> The flexibility to attend the university with the program I want, and not be in a driving distance [was appealing]. As a mom of [a] young child, and [working] full time, so all in general it falls into the flexibility that I was able to complete my degree without having to [necessarily] leave home. I could be here [at home] with my child and give her the time she needed. So, I did not need to get my car and go. I [could] do that at home.

Self-motivation and Purpose to Achieve a Goal Contributed to Persistence

Self-motivation to finish the program, to get a job, to move up the ladder, and to enhance skills all contributed to a successful program completion. Seven participants stated that they were motivated to complete the program because they wanted to get a job. Six participants wanted to move up the ladder. All participants were in their program to enhance their skills. Self-motivation to enhance skills was expressed by the desire to obtain higher education (e.g., obtain a PhD).

One of the participants revealed what helped her persist: "[it] was not the instructor that encouraged me to stay in the program. I can say, [it was] online motivation…. [Instructors'] influence was more about real world scenario." She explained that one motivation to keep moving forward was the outcome. She needed to be self-motivated to complete the program. This other participant explained her self-motivation to complete the program even though she was feeling overwhelmed:

> I was able to finish the first month of the class. So I said to myself that I can finish the class. I had family issues. I was overwhelmed. I took classes and I was working. The online classes were an option to manage my time.

Course Design and a Sense of Community Helped with Persistence

All participants articulated that the establishment of strong relationships with classmates and instructor, participation in discussions, and the use of technology were all part of the course design; they created a sense of community and contributed to their persistence in the program. All the women but one said that group work enhanced engagement and learning.

One of the participants explained how the online course design helped establish strong relationships with classmates and instructor:

> I really like how [the online course] was set up…. You have the main lecturer at the beginning of the week and then the discussions were based on that lecture and I liked the fact that the professors all required that we take detailed response and we actually responded to our classmates' weekly responses as well. [We] were required to maintain this level of contact with both the instructor and our classmates that made it seem not so disconnected as we all live in different parts of the world. So, we were able to stay in connection with one another.

Course discussions also helped become part of the online community. One of the participants conveyed her satisfaction with the online discussion by sharing her experience:

> [Online discussions] allowed me to learn about subjects at hand when you are responding to a classmate or respond[ing] to a question by a professor, and when you want to back up your argument with a little or more so you can impress your class, and you have to get more in-depth with your response.

Another participant explained how appealing the online conversations were and the sense of being a member of the group when someone responded to her posting:

> It was nice sometimes when you look at the discussion and noticed that a comment that you made has started to be much wider conversation among the large group of people and you know the catalyst of that helps everyone engage in the discussion.

Technology allowed participants to actively engage with each other through group project as this participant stated: "I liked [group projects] because…you got to know your classmates even more than just the online discussion board and you know it added the extra elements of teamwork. Everyone benefits from it." Another participant said that group work enhanced engagement and learning in the online environment:

> It was the group project with the other students where we met once or twice a week and discussed the material as well as putting together the pieces whether that was a paper or a PowerPoint. It was that feeling about interaction and communication that you had with other students and it was not necessarily at the same tone or at the same community that you were in. And therefore, they brought their experiences to the table and you were able to incorporate that to final group project.

One of the participants revealed the benefits of online group activities. She stated:

> I found myself more engaged in the online learning community when we had activities that required us to go offline. The discussion helped build relationship with my peers and helped me be engaged and required to do work for a group project.

Another participant was surprised with the amount of responses she received when she posted her first introduction. She declared:

> I remember the first one when it was my first experience, I put my introduction and my response there and I was very shy because I was doing this for no one, but for my surprise I had like five people talking to me right there and then the instructor too. So, that made me realize that Oh, I am not alone here…this is the online community. So that it was a very good experience for me.

Course Strategies Allowed for Immediate Application of Learning to Practice

The feasibility of the online program facilitated skill enhancement in the workplace and can be identified as employing learning to practice. Eight of the participants identified the practicality of the program helped to enhance their skills in the workplace. One of the participants recounted:

> The [course] content was really appealing to me because I work in adult and continuing education. So, for me going to school when I actually [was] working [at the institution] was [like] a lab. I was learning and I was doing what I learned. I remember I took a class on D2L on how to put [a course] together and at the same time, I was putting together a program at my work.

Eight of the participants were able to apply their learning to practice. This participant's story explains well application of learning to practice:

> It was implementing the material in an adult learning environment. I remember there was a course on being an adult about learning in a new online environment and the instructor

posted scripts and materials and showed us how to train, and how to utilize these

programs methods and the course structure…. This training showed me the actual

implementation some of the things that you are learning and for me that was resonated by

being able to put myself in the place of a student but at the same time as a creator of the

online program for potential adult students in the future…. And now with my current

employment, I utilize many of those strategies I learned and many of those methods.

Human and Institutional Support Influenced Program Completion

Instructors, advisors, technical personnel, peers, and family support influenced program

completion for the participants. Institutional support is represented by the online library, online

orientation, financial support (scholarships), application process, registrar's office, writing

center, and technical support.

Human Support

Instructor's engagement in the online discussion, interaction via technology, availability,

feedback, and immediate guidance were attributes that all participants cherished in the online

environment. The role of online instructors is not restricted to facilitating virtual classrooms but

also mentoring students who need help and support throughout the online program. One of the

participants expressed her happiness with the support she received from her instructor:

It was not easy right at the beginning. I have to say that professor [name of instructor]

helped me in this process because all my degrees are from [country name]….

[Instructor's name] was actually very important in this process because she called them

and explained [my] situation, and she helped me find someone to translate all my

degrees…. So, then, I got the approval to get the process going on.

Another participant shared how much she valued her instructor who also helped her

through the application process. She stated, "Somebody recommended [instructor's name] and

she was the best ever." Another participant expressed her gratitude for her instructor:

[Instructor's name] was there to answer all my questions, whenever I had questions she

was there. Then, I applied and I was accepted and she was not my advisor, but also I

contacted her right from the beginning. So, she was there. The communication was via

email and sometimes we had phone conversations on Skype.

Instructor support went beyond engagement in the online environment. One of the

participants affirmed:

Having an instructor who used different types of technology to engage you, which meets your learning style. There were professors who were accessible over the email, and definitely the Skype video discussion helped me feel engaged in the discussion. The discussion with my peers and having the professor engaging us in the discussion thread was really enjoyable. It encouraged me to be more active and engage more than a traditional class where I do not prefer to engage too much.

This participant highlighted the importance of online instructor engagement in helping her and her group members understand the course material:

I was in a virtual classroom where the instructor was on Skype in her home…. She was giving specific guidance and directions on a particular project we were working on. She was able to see the material that we presented electronically. We were able to ask questions, as well as interact with her via the computer, Skype. So, she could visually see us and we could visually see her well and listen to her through the computer and obtain the guidance we needed. So, to me it was the interaction piece and it really kept me engaged, and I felt she knew what projects we had and how we contributed and in fact this helped me learn the material.

Group work, getting feedback from instructors and peers, and responding to each other during discussion supported women's success to completion. One of the participants conveyed her feelings regarding support and what she gained from it: "Discussions and learning from others and being open to other ideas other than my own."

The role of the family for some of the participants was paramount to their success. Understanding, cooperation, flexibility, and encouragement were significant contributors to their success. Seven participants mentioned that they could not find enough time to spend with their families and friends as explained by this participant: "It was hard to balance everything. I need to focus and to do well. I cannot multitask. It was hard to do extracurricular things."

On the other hand, family support played a significant role in encouraging and motivating one of the participants: "For me, relaxing at home with my family was my biggest decompression part." One participant disclosed that the online program helped her manage her time: "The online program itself created the balance in my life." Finding this type of balance helped other women to have time for exercise, family, and friends. "I exercised on a regular basis. At that time, I did not have any family living close to me. I had co-workers who were a

support while I was in the program…exercise helped me remove stress," stated one participant. Another woman mentioned bike riding as a way to remove stress: "I began to ride a bike to work and that was the only outlet to balance stress between family and work."

Institutional Support

All participants praised the online library services that allowed them to navigate hundreds of resources. One participant mentioned that the library was the type of support she used the most. She said: "Once I found out about [it], it was [a] very helpful online support."

Six of the participants articulated the importance of the online orientation they received at the beginning of the program. They also praised the role of their advisors in directing them to online resources available for online students as this participant stated: "My academic advisor was with me the entire time."

The high cost of graduate school is the main concern for almost all graduate students who strive to get scholarships and financial aid to support their academic pursuit (Chen & Hossler, 2017). Women in this study mentioned the role of their professors and advisors in informing them about scholarships and financial aid available for online students. One of the participants acknowledged, "My advisor sent me a lot of announcements about the scholarships offered through the graduate school."

Regarding the application process and course enrollment, all study participants were satisfied with the easiness of the online application process and course enrollment. They also emphasized the role of their advisors who provided them with all possible support and help they needed at that time. One of the participants declared:

> It was extremely easy…it was relatively easy and very accessible…. It was mostly electronic and via a phone call…after I was admitted, my advisor contacted me right away and this is what I really liked about the program. This gave me confidence to start and become successful.

All participants valued the great technical support they received throughout their academic journey in graduate school. This support involved setting up password, learning how to navigate the learning management system, or resolving other technical issues. It is obvious that there were several factors that supported these women throughout their online academic journey. The amount of help, care, and guidance they received from their instructors, advisors, peers, family, and technical support personnel contributed to their persistence to completion.

Discussion

Findings highlight the complex social, emotional, environmental, and academic factors students can experience in learning online. Students' persistence was supported by their instructor, peers, and family members. Self-motivation and purpose to achieve a goal helped them complete their studies. Yau and Cheng (2012) in their study of a Hong Kong university found students' gender variances of confidence in using technology for learning. In their study, as in ours, women demonstrated successful interactions with the technology employed by the institution (though their study indicated greater success for male students).

Moreover, in our study learning occurred within the individuality of each participant and within the depth of their immediate relationships with others. Participants acquired new ways of thinking, and they experienced positive types of relationships with instructors and classmates. The distinctions between our study and Müller's (2008) study on women in online completion programs are that she found that the learners reported a lack of faculty interaction, difficulties with technology, no support from family members, and competing responsibilities, which affected the quality of the learning experience; the opposite was seen in our findings.

Our study's findings are consistent with Comer et al.'s (2015) examination of what attributes predispose students to a favorable view of online learning, course discussion, and course materials. Interaction with others did not lead participants to censor disclosure about their competence and insecurities about earning a degree online, instead, these women's stories support Haydarov et al.'s (2013) investigation of retention, graduation, and attrition in an online master's environment. They found that existing graduation metrics used to compare online and face-to-face programs underreport successful outcomes for online master's students by at least one-third.

Study Contributions and Implications to Higher Education and Adult Learning

The contributions of this study are in the areas of adult education, adult minority women's experiences, student support services for online students, and online student persistence. The most important implication of this study is how adult minority women who graduated from a master's degree program navigated the online learning process. It was clear from the findings that the self-motivation, commitment, and persistence of online minority graduate students and the online delivery format had an influence in their success.

Faculty, instructional designers, student support services personnel, and students can use this study's findings as a starting point to identify effective online support strategies. For example, faculty can promote peer interactions by providing students with ice breakers, instructions, and feedback on role-playing in online discussions. Instructional designers can assist faculty by creating detailed instructions on how students can navigate the online course. Student support services personnel can understand the type of support needed by minority women in online graduate programs such as advising, financial aid, and the application process. Students can use these findings to recognize the type of support needed from the institution, faculty, and support services personnel.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research should focus on principles that describe how instructors make decisions about their online course content and design. These principles should address two distinct questions: (1) who should participate in the decision making of designing, implementing, and evaluating master's degree programs, and (2) how much should students participate in the preparation process of an online course? The development and delivery of online master's programs have been shaped by technological inventions and students' attitudes toward online learning. Reliance on learner experience should lead the online education industry to calculate its audience very carefully. One might think that the institutional value of a program determines whether a student will graduate; however, the support that students receive while learning online is what matters.

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