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A CASE STUDY ON GRADUATES FROM AN ONLINE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM AND THEIR EXPERIENCES RELATED TO ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

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A CASE STUDY ON GRADUATES FROM AN ONLINE CERTIFICATE PROGRAM AND THEIR EXPERIENCES RELATED TO ENGAGEMENT PRACTICES

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Lorraine Marie Angelino
May 2009

Accepted by:
Dr. Frankie Keels Williams, Committee Chair
Dr. Mindy Spearman
Dr. Deborah Natvig
Dr. Tony Cawthon
ABSTRACT

The number of students taking online courses increased 146% from fall 2002 through fall 2007. In addition, the number of distance education programs increased 299% from 2000-01 through 2006-07. As the number of students taking online courses continues to increase, institutions of higher education will need to focus on increasing student retention and increasing student success. Low retention rates plague online programs that lack engagement practices. One method to achieving student success is engaging online learners early and often using engagement practices focused on increasing interactions with faculty, other students, course content, and members of the community.

Angelino and Natvig’s Model for Engagement provided the theoretical framework for the study. Rovai’s Composite Persistent Model, based on a synthesis of Bean and Metzner’s Student Attrition Model and Tinto’s Student Integration Model, further provided the theoretical foundation for the study.

The primary research question for the study was as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices? Thirteen secondary research questions related to engagement practices guided the study.

The research study used a qualitative, single case study design. Participants were graduates of an online certificate program between fall 2003 and spring 2008. Participants shared their stories related to engagement practices while completing the
program. Data were collected by conducting face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail interviews, compiling summary notes, and gathering artifacts. The data were analyzed following a six step generally accepted process for data analysis.

Three overall themes emerged from the findings of the study. The overall emergent theme for recruitment was managing the process. Participants were responsible for making initial contacts, expressing an interest, registering, reading the syllabi and topic/date outlines, and managing their time.

The overall emergent theme for coursework was that each participant had a unique experience focusing on career aspirations. Participants focused on applying the assignments to their work experience and career aspirations.

The overall emergent theme for program completion was celebration of accomplishment. Participants celebrated with classmates, family, and co-workers. Participants were proud of their accomplishment and have their certificates displayed in their offices at work.

General recommendations were made for administrators and accrediting agencies to develop policies for designing effective online programs with a focus on increasing student engagement, student retention, and student success. Recommendations for future research included conducting a national study using a quantitative survey research design for tracking student retention and student attrition for online courses and online programs.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in memory of a dear friend who stood beside me since I started my educational journey many years ago. Donna P. Cooper encouraged me to follow my dreams and to face adversity with an open mind and an open heart. Donna taught me that life is too short and to live each day to the fullest. Further, this dissertation is dedicated to Deborah Natvig, R.N., Ph.D., who encouraged me to pursue a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and provided support and guidance throughout my studies on student engagement and student retention. Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to my family, friends, co-workers, and professors. Their support was instrumental in helping me to achieve this milestone in my educational journey.
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The journey has been a long one, and I would like to acknowledge those who were with me along the way. From my very first day at Clemson, to completion of my dissertation, Dr. Frankie Keels Williams was instrumental in my success. Dr. Williams served not only as my dissertation committee chair, but also served as a mentor to me throughout the Educational Leadership program. I am forever grateful for her support and encouragement throughout the doctoral process.

I am thankful to Dr. Mindy Spearman, Dr. Tony Cawthon, and Dr. Deborah Natvig for serving on my dissertation committee and providing support, encouragement, and feedback that enhanced the quality of my dissertation. Dr. Spearman took time out of her busy schedule to teach me how to code my data in NVivo 8 and gave constructive feedback on the methodology and findings for the study. Dr. Cawthon provided last minute edits and was supportive and encouraging throughout the dissertation process. Dr. Natvig encouraged me to study student retention and student engagement using the online certificate program and co-designed the Model for Engagement, which provided the theoretical framework for the study. In addition, Dr. Natvig served as the gatekeeper during my dissertation study and provided access to the participants and artifacts.

Along the journey, I made many new friends who served as my support system during the doctoral process. I especially want to acknowledge the support and encouragement provided by Michelle Bartlett. Michelle and I stood beside each other throughout the dissertation process. I would also like to acknowledge the support and
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CHAPTER ONE
NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Online courses and programs provide an excellent opportunity for traditional and nontraditional students to attend classes in higher education, anytime and anywhere, with a large variety of educational choices. With the increase in educational choices, the number of students taking online courses increased at a rapid rate (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Waits & Lewis, 2003). An estimated 1,602,970 students took at least one online course during the fall 2002 term, which increased to 3,938,111 during the fall 2007 term (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Based on these numbers, there was a 146% increase in the number of students enrolled in online courses from fall 2002 through fall 2007. Likewise, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) estimated the number of degree and certificate programs taught through distance education (i.e., online programs, hybrid/blended online programs, or other distance education programs) increased from 2,810 in 2000-01 (Waits & Lewis, 2003) to 11,200 in 2006-07 (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). Accordingly, there was a 299% increase in the number of programs taught through distance education from 2000-01 through 2006-07.

While more students are pursuing online courses and online programs, the issue of student retention was cited as a major concern facing leaders of college and university campuses. Carr (2000) reported that retention rates were 10 – 20% lower for students who took online courses than for students who took on-campus courses. Other studies
reported retention rates were 21 – 36% lower for online courses (Dunagan, 2005; Lynch, 2001; Terry, 2001). Notwithstanding, the extant research on retention and online programs has been sparse (Roach, 2002). Roach suggested that research studies for online programs were limited due to the “newness of online education” (Roach, 2002, p. 22).

As the number of students choosing online courses increases, institutions of higher education must deliver high quality online courses and programs that focus on increasing student retention and increasing student success (Lorenzo & Moore, 2002; Roach, 2002). A key to developing a high quality program is to engage the students early and often using engagement practices aimed at increasing interaction between students, instructors, members of the community, and course content (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Conrad, 2002; Lorenza & Moore, 2002; Minich, 1996; Moody, 2004; Tinto, 1993). Students engaged in a program become comfortable, feel connected, have a sense of belonging, develop relationships with other students and instructors, and form learning communities (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 1993; Wehlage, Rutter, & Smith, 1989).

Numerous studies investigated the engagement practices of online learners (Anderson, 2004; Betts, 2008; Conrad, 2002; Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002; Kemp, 2002; Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999; Lynch, 2001; Minich, 1996; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2003; Twigg, 2004; Willging & Johnson, 2004). While most of these studies focused on online courses, only two studies were found that focused on online programs (Betts, 2008; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Betts’ (2008) study found students were more likely to be retained in high quality programs that provide a high level of engagement and personal
interaction. Willging & Johnson (2004) determined that students dropped out due to a lack of student-instructor interaction, student-student interaction, interest with content, support for technology, and personal connectedness.

Statement of the Problem

Two major issues found in the extant literature related to online programs were low retention rates (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Moody, 2004; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006; Thompson, 1999) and lack of student engagement in the learning process (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002; Lorenzo & Moore, 2002; Lynch, 2001; Martinez, 2003; Moody, 2004; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006). In a national survey of chief academic officers in higher education, 56% of the respondents reported low retention rates were an important or very important barrier to universal acceptance of online academic programs (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Furthermore, researchers found that online courses lacking engaged learning were ineffective and rallied for course redesign focusing on a learner-centered approach and student engagement (Anderson, 2004; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006; Serwatka, 2005; Twigg, 2004).

Low retention rates continue to plague online programs that lack engagement practices (Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002; Lorenzo & Moore, 2002; Lynch, 2001; Martinez, 2003; Moody, 2004; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006). Moreover, programs lacking engagement practices perpetuate the problem of low retention rates due to a lack of student interaction and connectedness (Betts, 2008; Willging & Johnson, 2004). The negative economic impact of low retention rates on institutions, students, and the
community, and the effect on an institution’s reputation were deemed monumental (Nitsch, 2003).

With low retention rates, institutions lose tuition revenue, while costs to design and deliver online courses remain high (Moody, 2004). Over time, low retention rates signal problems related to the quality of education for a program or institution (Moody, 2004; Thompson, 1999), which could negatively affect the marketing and recruitment of new students (Nitsch, 2003). Government support for institutions of higher education relies on enrollment data for distribution of funding, which makes retention of online learners critical in predicting fiscal budgets (Parker, 2003). The economic impact on students (i.e., on-campus, distance, and online) has both short-term and long-term effects. In the short-term, students lose the resources they expended during their time at college, which includes costs for tuition, books, time spent in class, and time spent on studying (Swail, 2004). In the long-term, students lose income potential and are more likely to be a burden on society (Swail, 2004).

In general, retention of online learners is a complex issue (Berge & Huang, 2004; Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2004). The literature review provided limited empirical research associated with low retention rates and student engagement for online programs (Betts, 2008; Willging & Johnson, 2004). Institutions of higher education must increase retention, persistence, and success rates, and provide a quality education to students participating in online programs (Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006).
Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of this research study was to explore specific engagement practices and the completion of graduates from an undergraduate online certificate program. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to explore graduates’ perceived experiences identified as engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework. An additional purpose of the study was to explore activities related to the participants’ completion of the program, including graduation and celebration of their success. Engagement practices related to recruitment included marketing, initial contact, registration, and class information. Engagement practices related to coursework included the course websites, introductions, assignments, and discussions.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

Components from Angelino and Natvig's (2007, 2009) Model for Engagement provided the basis for the theoretical framework for the study. Three strategic areas, recruitment, coursework, and post-coursework, from the model were used to guide the development of the conceptual framework and research questions. Rovai’s (2003) Composite Persistent Model, based on a synthesis of Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Student Attrition Model, and Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model further provided the theoretical foundation for the study.

Angelino and Natvig’s (2007, 2009) Model for Engagement illustrates practices for engaging students with their instructors, other students, members of the community, and course content. The theoretical assumption for the model is that the more engaged
students become in the learning process, the greater possibility of student success (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Rovai, 2002, 2003).

Rovai’s (2003) *Composite Persistent Model* suggests that students’ persistence decisions are based on “student characteristics and skills prior to admission and internal and external factors after admission” (p. 8). Bean and Metzner’s (1985) *Student Attrition Model* theorizes that nontraditional students have less interaction with the social environment on campus, but have greater interaction with the external environment. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) *Student Integration Model* focuses on academic integration and social integration as methods to increase retention. The present study explored the participants’ characteristics, computer skills, and engagement practices related to recruitment prior to admission into the program. In addition, the study explored external factors including employment and family responsibilities, along with the internal factors of engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework after admission into the program.

**Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Figure 1 provides a conceptual framework for the research study. The major components of the study included the participants (graduates of the online program), engagement practices (recruitment and coursework), and activities related to program completion (celebration of success and graduation).
Engagement Practices Related to Recruitment and Coursework

The conceptual framework for the study illustrates how students participated in engagement practices and ultimately were successful in an undergraduate online certificate program. The study explored graduates’ perceived experiences with engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework through program completion.

The demographics used to describe the participants before the start of the online program included gender, age, location, responsibilities, computer competency,
educational objective, and career objective. Engagement practices related to recruitment included marketing, initial contact, registration, and class information. Engagement practices related to coursework included course website, introductions, assignments, and discussions. The activities related to the program completion component were celebrate success and graduation.

Research Question

The research questions for the study were based on an exhaustive literature review on online courses/programs and student retention, student engagement, and other contemporary course delivery methods. As mentioned earlier, the extant research was limited linking online programs, retention, and student engagement. The central, overarching question that guided this research was as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices?

Further, the following secondary questions were developed to guide the research study:

Recruitment

1. What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?

2. What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?

3. What did the participants experience when registering for courses?
4. What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?

5. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Coursework

6. How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?

7. How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

8. What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

9. How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

10. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

Program Completion

11. How did the participants celebrate success?

12. What did the participants experience at graduation time?

13. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community to celebrate success?
Research Methods

The research study used a qualitative, single case study design. Qualitative case study research provides an intensive description, empowers individuals to share their stories, and let their voices be heard (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003). In this qualitative, single case study research, the graduates of an online certificate program shared their stories related to engagement practices while completing the program.

In the study, the researcher explored the experiences of the graduates’ from the online certificate program by conducting interviews, compiling summary notes, and collecting documents for additional evidence. The data were analyzed following a six step generally accepted process for data analysis (Creswell, 2003; Tesch, 1990). The first step was to organize the data, including transcribing interviews, typing up summary notes, and gathering artifacts. The second step included reading all data collected, getting an overall sense of the data, and recording emerging ideas. The third step was to code all data into categories. The fourth step was to review the coding and generate themes to include in the analysis of the data. The fifth step included describing the themes that emerged from the study using a narrative passage. The sixth step was to interpret the findings including what was learned from the research experience. *NVivo 8.0* software was employed to assist the researcher in organizing the data, coding the data, and analyzing the data for emerging themes.
Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms were used in the study.

Attrition. Students that dropout or leave an online course or online program before completion (Berge & Huang, 2004; Martinez, 2003).

Celebrate Success. The act or acts of congratulating graduates at the completion of the certificate program (e.g., instructors congratulating graduates, students congratulating graduates, dinner with family).

Course Websites. The websites used for online course management including tools (e.g., e-mail, discussions, chat sessions, assignments, and assessments) for interacting with students and instructors.

Distance education. Education that is delivered to remote locations via audio, video, or through computer-based technologies such as synchronous chats or asynchronous discussion boards (Waits & Lewis, 2003, p. iii).

Engagement. “Actively participating, interacting, and collaborating with students, faculty, members of the community, and course content” (Angelino & Natvig, 2009, p.3).

Initial Contact. The first contact with the program director or program faculty member associated with the online certificate program.

Interaction. Engagement with the intent on learning (Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994; Moody, 2004).

Learning Community. Students that collaborate, share knowledge and experiences with other learners, and together increase their knowledge base (i.e., student cohort) (Anderson, 2004; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).
Marketing. A concerted effort to advertise the online certificate program including brochures, advertisements in magazines, letters to community leaders, and word of mouth.

Nontraditional students. Students over the age of 24, living off-campus, attending college on a part-time basis, may have a full-time or part-time job, and other responsibilities at home such as children or spouse (Shane, 2000).

Online course. Courses where the content is delivered via the internet with no (or very limited) face-to-face contact (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Online Certificate program. An academic program delivered online that consists of four college level courses designed around a common subject.

Persistence. Students continuing toward an educational goal, which could be completing a course, a degree, or a certificate program (Berge & Huang, 2004; Martinez, 2003).

Retention. Progressing from one level to the next until completion of the program or until the student’s personal goal is satisfied, which could be a course, a degree, or certificate program (Berge & Huang, 2004; Martinez, 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Success. The completion of the requirements for the online certificate program and becoming a graduate of the program.

Traditional students. Students between the ages of 17 and 23, attending college on a full-time basis immediately following high school, and living on campus or near campus (Shane, 2000).
Delimitations

The study was a qualitative, single case study that explored the experiences of graduates of one online certificate program. Secondary questions specifically focused on engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework through course completion. Further, the study was bound by the graduates of a specialized online certificate program at a public university in the state of South Carolina. The participants included graduates from fall 2003 through spring 2008. Data collection was performed using face-to-face, telephone, and online interviews.

Limitations

The ability of the participants to recall their experiences with the online certificate program limited the study. Interviews were conducted using three forms of communication including face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail, which could have limited some of the responses. Contact information for the participants was not up-to-date so it is possible the three graduates that did not participate were not aware of the study. Furthermore, it is possible that the three graduates that were not interviewed had a different perspective.

Significance of the Study

The findings of the study may provide administrators and instructors assistance in designing and offering online programs focusing on engaging the online learner and increasing the success of online students. This study could assist administrators to
evaluate the online programs taught at their institutions and develop policies for
designing effective online programs aimed at increasing student engagement, retention,
and success.

In addition, the results of the study may aid accrediting agencies in developing
and/or revising assessment criteria for evaluating engagement of the online learner. The
study could encourage researchers to develop future studies that focus on student
retention in online programs in contrast to the current practice of researching student
retention in online courses.

Organization of the Study

The study contains five chapters. Chapter One includes the introduction,
statement of the problem, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, conceptual
framework, research questions, research methods, definition of terms, delimitations, and
significance of the study.

Chapter Two provides a review of the literature. The chapter includes research on
growth in online learning, retention of the online learner, retention theories and models,
and strategies for improving student engagement and retention of the online learner.

Chapter Three provides a review of research procedures. The chapter includes the
research design, research questions, description of the case, participants, role of
researcher, data collection, methods of interviewing, data analysis, validation of findings,
and ethical considerations.

Chapter Four provides the findings from the study. The chapter includes an
analysis of data collected and emerging themes.

Chapter Five provides a summary of major findings from the study and discussions related to emergent themes. The chapter concludes with general recommendations and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to present a review of the literature associated with student retention and student engagement in an online learning environment. The literature review begins with an overview of the growth of students enrolling in online courses and the growth in the number of online programs from 2000 until 2007. This section is followed by a review and synthesis of studies on characteristics of online learners. The chapter continues with a synthesis of the literature on retention rates for online courses and online programs. Low student retention and lack of student engagement are presented in the literature review as major issues related to online courses and programs. In addition, relevant theories and models related to retention and engagement in online courses and programs are presented. These theories and models include Spady’s (1970, 1971) Sociological Model of Student Departure, Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Theory of Departure and Student Integration Model, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, Rovai’s (2003) Composite Persistence Model, and Angelino and Natvig’s (2007, 2009) Model for Engagement. The final section of the literature review focuses on strategies for increasing student engagement and effective online learning practices.
Growth in Online Learning

The number of students taking online courses and online programs increased at a higher rate than the annual growth rate of total higher education enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In fall 2002, the total enrollment for higher education in the United States was 16,611,710 students with 1,602,970 students enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In fall 2007, the total enrollment for higher education was 17,975,830 with 3,938,111 students enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2008). From fall 2002 to fall 2007, the growth rate for students participating in online courses increased 146%. Online enrollment increased from 9.6% of total enrollment in fall 2002 to 21.9% in fall 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The compound annual growth rate in online enrollment between fall 2002 and fall 2007 was 19.7% for online enrollment and only 1.6% for total enrollment (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

The growth rate for online programs was similar to that for online courses. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reported an increase in online degree and certificate programs from 2,810 in 2000-01 (Waits & Lewis, 2003) to 11,200 in 2006-07 (Parsad & Lewis, 2008). In 2005, 2,251 institutions of higher education were surveyed regarding online program offerings, and 31.4% reported they offered fully online programs. Further, the study reported that 64% of institutions with enrollments of over 15,000 students had online programs in comparison to 18% of institutions with enrollments under 1,500. In addition, 55.7% of doctoral/research, 43.6% masters, 31.2% associates, 26.0% specialized, and 17.2% baccalaureate institutions had online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2006).
Retention of Online Learners

A synthesis of studies on characteristics of online learners, retention in online courses, and retention in online programs are presented in this section. In addition, this section provides an overview of low retention rates as a barrier for online learning.

Characteristics of Online Learners

Online learners traditionally were identified as “independent, self-directed, autonomous, internally motivated, and collaborative in some cases” (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007, p. 6; Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001). Online learners were often described as between 22 and 50 years of age, with full-time jobs, childcare or other family responsibilities, attending college on a part-time basis, intending to complete individual courses instead of an entire program of study, and having some computer experience (Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 2002; Nash, 2005; Yorke, 2005). Conceição (2007) described the online learner as adults of all ages and educational backgrounds with a variety of educational needs. Further, Conceição commented that online learners were independent, self-starters, extremely motivated, and committed to pursuing higher education.

In a study on why women took online courses, Kramarae (2001) focused on women as the primary users of online education and found that women enjoyed the flexibility offered by online courses including being able to set their own schedules. In addition, Kramarae found women balanced work, family obligations, community, and education, while “men with families,…considered family responsibilities to be at their discretion” (p. 18).
In a study on characteristics of women who persisted in an online degree program, Müller (2007) interviewed 20 students enrolled in online programs who attended a five-week residency program. Müller reported barriers were found to women persisting in an online degree program. Barriers reported by Müller consisted of multiple responsibilities, lack of interaction with faculty, technology, and coursework. Furthermore, Müller found women who were highly motivated to complete a degree, engaged in a learning community, and held an appreciation for the convenience of an online degree program were more likely to persist to program completion.

Retention in Online Courses

Research on retention of students enrolled in online courses and programs focused mostly on individual online courses (Nash, 2005; Kemp 2002). Retention rates for online courses were lower than on campus courses (Carr, 2000; Dunagan, 2005; Lynch, 2001; Terry, 2001). Dunagan (2005) conducted a five year study to compare retention rates for online students \(n=80\) and on campus students \(n=1091\) in an introductory geology course. Dunagan found that retention rates for online students were 21% lower than retention rates for on campus students. In another study, Terry (2001) studied 15 graduate business courses and compared retention rates for online courses to on campus courses. Terry found that more students enrolled in the online courses even though retention rates for online courses were lower than on campus courses. Further, Terry reported that courses in business statistics and finance did not appear to be very well suited to the Internet instruction format.
Other researchers reported the number one reason students dropped or failed online courses was a lack of discipline (i.e., time management) (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Nash, 2005). Nash (2005) reported that students felt course assignments were too difficult, assignments were not clearly written, and help was not available when needed in the online courses. In another study, Martinez (2003) found personal reasons including family issues, finances, childcare, and job responsibilities were reasons that online students withdrew from a course. Hara and Kling (2001) found students cited confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to a lack of timeliness and clarity of faculty communications as their reasons for withdrawing from courses. Some students cited a feeling of isolation when taking online courses (Hara & Kling, 2001). Moody (2004) found students thought online classes would be easier, while others dropped the courses due to a lack of experience with technology.

In contrast to studies on low retention rates and reasons for low retention rates for online courses, Moore, Sener, & Fetzner (2006) presented a collection of vignettes from twelve colleges and one university that achieved online course retention rates of over 80%. All institutions saw online courses as a strategic initiative for growth, provided training and support for faculty and students, designed online courses that promoted engagement and interaction, and continuously assessed the courses for methods to improve outcomes.
Retention in Online Programs

Studies on retention rates for online programs were limited. Willging and Johnson (2004) stated, “Although online programs are growing…there is a lack of research focused on persistence and attrition in those programs” (p. 108). Roach (2002) suggested studies were limited due to the “newness of online education” (p. 22).

Nevertheless, two studies (Willging & Johnson, 2004; Betts, 2008) focused on student retention rates for online programs. Willging and Johnson (2004) studied students that had dropped out of an online Master’s of Education (Ed.M.) program. Out of approximately 90 students (3 cohorts), 28 students dropped out of the program. Out of the 28 students that dropped out, 10 students participated in a survey to determine reasons for leaving. There were various reasons for students that left the program including personal, job-related, and program-related reasons. The researchers found that online students left a program after completing the first couple of courses. Willging and Johnson (2004) concluded that online students left for similar reasons to students who took programs face-to-face. Nonetheless, Willging and Johnson found reasons that were unique to online students included technology issues, lack of human interaction, and communication problems. For future research, Willging and Johnson (2004) suggested that it would be beneficial to include a survey of the persisters’ reasons for staying in the program.

Betts (2008) introduced a conceptual framework called Online Human Touch (OHT) for teaching an online Master of Science in Higher Education (MSHE) program. The OHT process posited, “Students are more likely to persist in an online program if they are engaged in and outside their courses and if the educational experience is
personalized” (p. 399). Data were collected from 75 students enrolled in the MSHE program in spring 2008 using an annual survey, course evaluations, and reflective papers and journals. Betts found that students’ retention rates from fall 2005 through spring 2008 averaged 83%. Additional findings from Betts’ study included the following, (a) “students sought strong academic programs that offered opportunities for personal interaction,” (b) students were interested in “work-integrated learning” and “practice-based assignments,” and (c) “community development was important for building and fostering a lifelong connection between the university and online students” (p. 414).

Low Retention Rates--Barriers to Online Learning

Retention rates for students in online courses and programs were reported to be lower than their face-to-face counterparts (Carr 2000; Dunagan, 2005; Lynch, 2001; Terry, 2001). Chief academic officers reported low retention rates were a barrier to universal acceptance of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2007). In a study on the growth of online learning, chief academic officers rated six possible barriers to universal acceptance of online learning. The six barriers, in order of importance, included: (a) “students need more discipline in online courses,” (b) “lack of acceptance of online instruction by faculty,” (c) “lower retention rates in online courses,” (d) “higher costs to develop online courses,” (e) “higher costs to deliver online courses,” and (f) “lack of acceptance of online degrees by employers” (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p.20). In the same study, the greatest concern for low retention rates was reported for institutions that were not yet engaged or not interested in online learning. The study indicated that institutions
not yet engaged were concerned with all six barriers and these concerns were preventing
the institutions from introducing online courses and programs.

Retention Theories and Models

Angelino and Natvig’s (2007) *Model for Engagement* consisted of four strategic
areas. The areas of focus included: (a) recruitment, (b) coursework, (c) post coursework,
and (d) alumni, and provided the primary theoretical link for the study.

The concern for low retention in higher education became a reality in the 1960s,
sometime prior to the popularity of online courses and programs. Spady (1970, 1971)
investigated the issue of retention by designing and conducting a longitudinal study.
Later, during the 1970s, research on retention turned to theory and model building
(Spady, 1970, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Appropriately, in the 1980s, research on retention
expanded to include nontraditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985). In the late 1990s,
research on retention expanded to include retention of online students (Rovai, 2003). In
2007, Angelino and Natvig introduced a *Model for Engagement* and theorized that
engaging the online learner using multiple engagement practices throughout an online
program was one method to increase student retention, and therefore, increase student
success.

*William Spady’s Sociological Model of the Dropout Process*

In 1970, Spady introduced the *Sociological Model of the Dropout Process*. Spady
studied student departure from a sociological viewpoint theorizing that students who
interacted with their environment, both socially and academically, would likely persist (Berger & Lyon, 2005). Spady (1971) tested his model and theory using longitudinal data he collected from 683 students between 1965 and 1969 at the College of the University of Chicago. Spady found that “formal academic performance was clearly the dominant factor in accounting for attrition among both sexes” (p. 38). Furthermore, Spady encouraged future researchers to look at how students interact with the university environment.

Vincent Tinto’s Theory of Departure and Student Integration Model

Tinto (1975, 1993) studied Spady’s model of departure and enhanced the model formerly developed by Spady. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) theory of student departure posited that student experiences and characteristics before a student arrives at college and experiences at college were factors that influence whether a student will persist and become successful. Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model illustrated the theory of student departure including the importance of academic integration and social integration as a method to increase persistence. Researchers (Berger & Lyon, 2005; Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Nash, 2005; Rovai, 2002; Seidman, 2005) pointed out that Tinto’s (1975, 1993) student integration model remains the primary theoretical framework cited in studies on retention (and the foundation for retention programs and services in higher education).
John P. Bean and Barbara S. Metzner’s Conceptual Model

After studying Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model, Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, based on the theory that nontraditional students had less interaction with the campus environment and greater interaction with the external environment. The model illustrated how students interact with academic variables, environmental variables, and social integration variables in determining academic outcomes, psychological outcomes, intent to leave, and ultimately whether to dropout.

Bean and Metzner (1985) proposed that needs were different between traditional on-campus students and nontraditional students. Bean and Metzner (1985) defined nontraditional students to have one or more of the following attributes: were over 24 years of age, lived off-campus, or were a part-time student. Bean and Metzner (1985) posited that nontraditional students lacked the need for social interaction in on-campus activities and attrition was attributed to the external environment.

Alfred P. Rovai’s Composite Persistence Model

Rovai (2003) evaluated Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model, and found that they did not explain low retention for distance learners. Rovai (2003) designed a Composite Persistence Model that incorporated Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition, and other relevant variables to explain persistence of the online learner. Rovai’s Composite Persistence Model explained how students have
certain characteristics and skills before being admitted to college, and once they were
admitted, interact with external factors and internal factors. Depending on the student’s
characteristics, skills, internal factors, and external factors, the student will choose to
either persist in the program or dropout. Rovai’s model characterized reasons for
departure as external and internal factors.

Rovai’s *Composite Persistence Model* was used as the theoretical framework for a
study on low retention in a graduate online program (Perry, Boman, Care, Edwards, &
Park, 2008). Perry et al. found students left for personal reasons (i.e., life circumstances
and work commitments) and for program reasons (i.e., learning style and changing career
path). In addition, Perry et al. reported external factors contributed to students leaving the
program. These external factors included “finances, hours of employment, family
responsibility, and life crisis” (p. 10). Internal factors included “program fit, learning
style, and clarity of the program” (p. 10).

*Lorraine Angelino & Deborah Natvig’s Model for Engagement*

Angelino and Natvig (2007) studied Tinto’s (1975, 1993) model, Bean and
Metzner’s (1985) model, and Rovai’s (2003) model, and developed a model based on the
theory that engaging students early and often increased retention in an online program.
The *Model for Engagement* consisted of four strategic areas: (a) recruitment,
(b) coursework, (c) post coursework, and (d) alumni (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009).
Each strategic area provides multiple opportunities for students to participate in
engagement practices with other students, instructors, graduates, course content, and members of the community.

1. Recruitment consists of (a) marketing, (b) initial contact, (c) potential students, (d) registration, and (e) class information.

2. Coursework consists of (a) course website, (b) start of class, (c) assignments, (d) discussions, and (e) course activities.

3. Post coursework consists of (a) pre-registration, (b) course evaluation, (c) student feedback, (d) celebrate success, and (e) graduation.

4. Alumni consists of (a) alumni association, (b) mentoring, (c) interviews, (d) promote program, and (e) recommendations.

**Strategies for Improving Student Engagement and Retention**

*Student Interactions*

Moore (1989) introduced three forms of interactions for online learning, which included learner-content interaction, learner-instructor interaction, and learner-learner interaction. Learner-content interaction was defined as “the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes in the learner’s understanding, the learner’s perspective, or cognitive structures of the learner’s mind” (Moore, 1989, p. 2). Learner-instructor interaction was identified as a process where the instructor provides students with expertise on the topic being taught, stimulates interest in the course, motivates the student to learn, and delivers individualized support, encouragement, and feedback. Learner-learner interaction involves students interacting one-on-one or in a
group setting (i.e., online discussions). Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) introduced a fourth form of interaction for online learning, learner-interface interaction, which is the interaction between the student and technology. In 2007, Angelino and Natvig introduced student-community interaction, which was defined as interactions between student and members of the community including, field activities, interviews with professionals, and application of course materials in personal or work environments.

**Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement**

Strategies for increasing student engagement included interactions with the student early and often (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Minch, 1996). For example, early strategies for engaging the online learner were contacting students by telephone (Towles, Ellis, & Spencer, 1993), providing orientation prior to the start of class (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005), facilitating online introductions (Anderson, 2004), and facilitating informal chats (Carnevale, 2000). Virtual icebreakers such as introductions and informal chats were identified as methods that facilitated students learning about their classmates and the instructor, and assisted in helping students feel more comfortable in the learning environment (Anderson, 2004; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Carnevale, 2000).

Additional strategies for engaging the online learner included assisting students with registration, designing the course website early for students to view, providing assignments that require interaction with instructor, other students, course content, and members of the community (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009). The scholars suggested
discussions designed around current events with student-initiated ideas for discussion topics. These discussions could be student-led with “behind the scenes” coaching from the instructor (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009). At the end of each semester, instructors could promote student success by encouraging students to congratulate their classmates who were graduating from the program (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009).

A common thread in the literature suggested that in designing effective online courses, student engagement with learner-centered activities represented a key component (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Diaz and Bontenbal, 2001; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Diaz and Bontenbal (2001) suggested that a learner-centered approach was a viable method to engage the online learner. Instructors become facilitators, guides, or mentors instead of instructors that lecture and “dispense knowledge” to students. Diaz and Bontenbal (2001) commented that the learner-centered approach “demanded more active forms of classroom instruction that engaged the student in the process of learning and relied on student input for shaping instructional objectives” (p. 2).

**Strategies for Improving Retention**

Yorke (2005) suggested practices that could enhance student persistence in online programs. Yorke’s suggested practices included marketing, conducting initial assessments of students entering a program, providing student engagement, providing a sense of belonging, and becoming a member in a community of scholars. Yorke (2005) pointed out that student’s perceptions of their learning experiences, and how providers of
courses treated them, were likely to be of prime significance. Furthermore, Yorke (2005) felt concentrating on improving retention rates was focusing on a symptom and not the cause. Yorke stated, “If the student experience is ‘got right’ at an affordable cost…, then the chances of student persistence are likely to be enhanced” (p. 30).

The literature advanced that learning communities represent a practice that can increase retention. Learning communities were formed so online students could work collaboratively, feel connected, and expand their knowledge base (Anderson, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978). Conrad and Donaldson (2004) stated, “Engaged learning stimulates learners to actively participate in the learning situation, and thus gain the most knowledge from being a member of an online learning community” (p. 7). Researchers advocated that online learners could use learning communities to overcome obstacles such as physical separation, feeling of isolation, lack of support, and feeling disconnected (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Wilson, 2001).

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a review of the literature related to student retention and student engagement in an online learning environment. The chapter commenced with a review of the data on the growth of online courses and programs. Studies discussed in this section provided an overview of the increase in popularity for online courses and programs. Between 2002 and 2006, there was a 146% increase in the number of students taking online courses. There was a 299% increase in the number of distance education programs (primarily, online programs) taught between 2000 and 2007.
The section on the growth of online courses and programs was followed by a discussion of the literature related to retention of the online learner including characteristics of online learners, retention in online courses, retention in online programs, and low retention rates as barriers to online learning. Studies found that while online learners enjoyed the flexibility of online programs, successful online learners needed to possess certain skills such as being independent, internally motivated, and engaged in a learning community. Studies showed that low retention rates were a major concern in the online learning environment. The literature suggested that retention rates were low due to a lack of engagement practices in online programs. The chapter continued with a presentation of relevant retention theories to help explain students’ behaviors while enrolled in these environments. The literature review concluded with an examination of and strategies for student engagement in online learning environments.
CHAPTER THREE
RESEARCH PROCEDURES

The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design, data collection, and data analysis procedures employed in the study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the selected research design, research questions, description of the case, selection of participants, and role of the researcher. Following the research design, the chapter concludes with a description of sources of data collection, methods of interviewing, data analysis, validation of findings, and ethical considerations.

Research Design

A qualitative, descriptive single case study design was selected for the research study. The research design was selected to answer the central, overarching research question: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices?

Creswell (2007), Merriam (1998), and Yin (2003) suggested that qualitative case study research provided intensive description, empowered individuals to share their stories, and let the participants’ voices be heard. In this qualitative, single case study, the intent of the research was to have graduates from an online certificate program share their stories related to engagement practices while they were enrolled in the program through completion of the program. Yin (2003) also defined case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context,
especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). For this study, the researcher sought to investigate the phenomenon of “persistence to graduation” from a real lived context for the individuals from the online program.

Merriam (1998) viewed case study as “a thing, a single entity, or a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Case study research could be designed using a single case study or multiple case studies (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). A case could be a person, program, class, school, community, or policy (Merriam, 1998). In this study, the unit of analysis was viewed as a single case, consisting of a collective group of graduates from an online certificate program. Further, in designing a case study, the researcher must give a rationale for using a single case (Yin, 2003). Yin discussed five rationales for using single case study designs. Yin’s rationales included cases that were deemed a critical case, an extreme or unique case, a representative or typical case, a revolutionary case, and a longitudinal case. Merriam (1998) stated, “A case study might be selected for its very uniqueness, for what it can reveal about a phenomenon, knowledge we would not otherwise have access to” (p. 33). A single case study design was selected for this research study to learn about a group of graduates from an online certificate program considered unique because of their shared experiences with intentional engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework through program completion. More specifically, a single case study was selected to understand the participants’ perceived experiences with engagement practices that were employed as part of the online certificate program.
This qualitative study was characterized further as a descriptive, single case study. A descriptive case study presents a rich, “thick description” of the phenomenon under study (Geertz, 1973; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002). For this study, providing a “thick description” allows the reader to obtain a detailed description of engagement practices employed in an online certificate program as perceived by the graduates. In this study, the researcher explored the graduates’ perceived experiences in the online certificate program by conducting interviews, compiling summary notes, and collecting artifacts for additional evidence. The descriptive data were collected, recorded in an interview format, imported into NVivo 8 software, coded, summarized, and analyzed for meaning in terms of emerging themes.

Research Questions

The central, overarching question that guided this research was as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices?

Further, the following secondary research questions were developed based on the related literature, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework to guide the research study:

Recruitment

1. What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?
2. What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?

3. What did the participants experience when registering for courses?

4. What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?

5. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Coursework

6. How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?

7. How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

8. What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

9. How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

10. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

Program Completion

11. How did the participants celebrate success?

12. What did the participants experience at graduation time?
13. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community to celebrate success?

Two components, recruitment and coursework, were chosen for the study because these components focused on the participants, and how they perceived engagement practices in the online certificate program, while they were students. The third component, program completion, was chosen because this component focused on how participants celebrated their success. The participants were able to relive their experiences related to engagement practices by answering the questions that guided the study. The study was bound from the time the students first learned of the program to the time they graduated. Three strategic areas (recruitment, coursework, and post-coursework) consistent with Angelino and Natvig’s (2007, 2009) Model for Engagement were used as the fundamental elements in the theoretical framework for the study.

Certificate Program

The certificate program referenced in the study is an online program at a public university in South Carolina that consists of four related courses. The program was designed and marketed as an online certificate program. The program was available to individuals with experience in a leadership or management positions or individuals that planned to pursue management positions in the future. As mentioned earlier, the certificate program commenced fall semester 2003 and graduated its first students in spring 2005. The program consisted of four courses and each course was offered once a year (two in the fall semester and two in the spring semester). To graduate from the
program, students were required to pass all four courses with a C or better. The four courses in the online certificate program included (a) *Principles of Health Care Management*, (b) *Legal, Ethical, and Regulatory Aspects of Health Care*, (c) *Financial Aspects of Health Care*, and (d) *Supervision and Human Resource Management*. Each course was limited to 15 students per semester to promote student-instructor and student-student interaction.

**Program Enrollment**

The online certificate program commenced in the fall 2003-04 and six students took the *Principles of Management* course. Of the original cohort, two students (33%) graduated in spring 2004-05. In spring 2003-04, seven additional students entered the program and took *Legal, Ethical, and Regulatory Aspects*. None of the students from the spring 2003-04 cohort went on to graduate from the program as of spring 2008. In fall 2008-09, one student that started in spring 2003-04 returned to take additional classes in the program. Table 1 provides enrollment and graduation data by cohort for the online certificate program from fall 2003-04 through spring 2007-08.
Table 1

*Online Certificate Program Enrollment and Graduation Data by Cohort*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Number of Students</th>
<th>Number of Students in Cohort that Registered for Classes for First Time in Certificate Program</th>
<th>Percentage of Students in Cohort that Graduated</th>
<th>Number of Students Enrolled as of fall 2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-04</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-05</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-06</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-07</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>Fall</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-08</td>
<td>Spring</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beginning fall 2004-05, eight additional students entered the program with two courses offered. Four of the students (50%) from the fall 2004-05 cohort graduated. During spring 2004-05, 12 additional students entered the program with two courses offered. Two of the students (17%) from the spring 2004-05 cohort graduated from the program.

Starting fall 2005-06, six additional students entered the program with two courses offered. Three of the students (50%) from the fall 2005-06 cohort graduated. In spring 2005-06, 12 additional students entered the program with two courses offered. Five of the students (42%) from the spring 2005-06 cohort graduated.

During fall 2006-07, six additional students entered the program with two courses offered. One student (17%) from the fall 2006-07 cohort graduated. Beginning spring 2006-07, five additional students entered the program with two courses offered. None of the students from the spring 2006-07 cohort graduated. During fall 2008-09, two students from the spring 2006-07 cohort remained enrolled in the program.

In fall 2007-08, nine additional students entered the program with two courses offered. None of the students from the fall 2007-08 cohort graduated. During fall 2008-09, two students from the fall 2007-08 cohort remained enrolled in the program. Starting spring 2007-08, ten additional students entered the program with two courses offered. None of the students from the spring 2007-08 cohort graduated. During fall 2008-09, one student from the spring 2007-08 cohort remained enrolled in the program.
Participants

The participants for the study included graduates from the online certificate program. The graduates of the online certificate program were chosen because of the 81 students that took courses in the program only 17 or 21% graduated since the program’s inception during fall 2003 continuing through spring 2008. In addition, the participants had first-hand experiences with engagement practices related to recruitment, coursework, and persistence to graduation.

As of the end of spring 2008, the population of graduates was 17. The full population of graduates was invited to participate in the study with one exception. The researcher for the study was a graduate of the online certificate program, and was currently a program designer, and an instructor of the program. Out of the remaining 16 graduates, 13 graduates or 81.25% of the graduates participated in the study. In the findings of the study, pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Role of Researcher

Merriam (1998) described the researcher as “the primary instrument for gathering and analyzing data” (p. 20). The researcher must be cognizant of personal biases and minimize the influences one’s biases may have on the study (Merriam, 1998). Yin (2003) suggested that the researcher must have the skills needed to ask the appropriate questions, to “listen” to the answers, and to adapt to new situations with a positive attitude.

Furthermore, the researcher must understand the issues related to the problem being
researched and must have the ability to interpret the information at the time of collection without using the case study to “substantiate a preconceived position” (p. 61).

In the case of this study, the researcher was a graduate of the online certificate program (spring 2005) and served as a program designer. The researcher served as an instructor of the online certificate program since spring 2005. The researcher had firsthand knowledge of the certificate program and understood issues related to online programs. Furthermore, the researcher had rapport with the graduates and possessed skills to ask questions, listen to their responses, and adapt to adverse situations.

Data Collection

The data collection for the study followed Yin’s (2003) three principles for collecting case study data: (a) use multiple sources of evidence, (b) create a case study database, and (c) maintain a chain of evidence. Yin discussed six sources of evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation, and physical artifacts. Data collection for the study included two main components for evidence and documentation: one-on-one interviews and summary notes. In addition, evidence and documentation were collected from the instructors and graduates of the online certificate program and included the program brochure, the initial letter sent to students before the start of class, syllabi, course outlines, newspaper clippings, advertisements, certificate of program completion, and copies of the assignments the graduates described as either their favorite or most engaging.
All data collected for the study were entered into *NVivo 8*, to create an electronic database. *NVivo 8* is a tool that allowed the researcher to organize the data, code the data, analyze the data, and determine emerging themes. During the course of the study, the researcher maintained a chain of evidence by keeping a journal of when graduates were contacted, the method of contact, and the responses from the participants. The journal also included the schedule for interviews and any communication with the participants.

The first data collection component was one-on-one interviews where participants were asked questions centered on the primary research question and the 13 secondary research questions. Each interview lasted approximately 20 – 25 minutes. The researcher conducted six face-to-face interviews, five telephone interviews, and two e-mail interviews. An incentive for the graduates to participate included a gift bag valued at $50. The gift bags included a drawstring bag, t-shirt, frisbee, pens, pencils, pedometer, cozie, and alumni information from the university and cups, coasters, sticky notes, camera, letter opener, pens, and lunch cooler from local businesses. The gift bags were well received by the participants.

Each face-to-face interview and/or telephone interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in an interview format using Microsoft Word by the researcher. Once the interviews were transcribed, the interview transcripts were sent by e-mail to the participants and member-checked by the participants for accuracy of content. The participants were allowed to check the information to ensure the data were transcribed and interpreted accurately. The researcher imported the interview data into *NVivo 8* and coded each interview.
The second data collection component was summary notes written immediately after each interview was conducted. The summary notes included a summarization of observations made from the researcher’s point of view. Summary notes included the interview setting, body language, mood of the conversation, general observations, and a summary of the interaction from the researcher’s point of view. The researcher transcribed the summary notes, imported the summary notes into NVivo 8, and coded the summary notes.

Evidence and documentation, including the program brochure, initial letter, syllabi, course outlines, newspaper clippings, advertisements, certificate of program completion, and copies of the assignments the graduates described as either their favorite or most engaging, were collected from the instructors and graduates of the online certificate program. The researcher imported the artifacts into NVivo 8 and used the evidence as supporting documentation.

Methods of Interviewing

The study employed multiple methods of interviewing, including face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail. Six participants participated in face-to-face interviews, five participants participated in telephone interviews, and two participants preferred to complete e-mail interviews. The participants of the study were graduates of an online certificate program and therefore, were computer competent. Face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail interviews were semi-structured. Follow up questions were used to clarify
comments made by participants or to probe for additional information in all three methods of interviewing.

The face-to-face and telephone interviews were both supported as common and acceptable methods of interviewing. Researchers indicated that there are no significant differences in the data collected during face-to-face and telephone interviews (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Opdenakker, 2006; Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004). E-mail interviews and e-interviews were identified as newer methods of interviewing (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Opdenakker, 2006). Opdenakker (2006) discussed the advantages and disadvantages of different interview techniques including face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and MSN messengers and concluded that “all four interview techniques shared common principles/basics and could be equally used for conducting interviews in research” (p. 12).

In the study, the researcher interviewed six participants face-to-face, traveling up to four hours round-trip for one interview. The advantages of interviewing face-to-face for the researcher included meeting the graduates in person for the first time, recording of the interviews, getting detailed responses to interview questions, observing non-verbal cues, and securing information to write detailed summary notes. The disadvantages of interviewing face-to-face for the researcher consisted of required time for travel, some technical problems with tape recorders, time for transcribing the interviews, and costs for gasoline.

The researcher interviewed five participants over the telephone. The advantages of conducting the interviews over the telephone for the researcher included having access
to participants with busy schedules, getting detailed responses to interview questions, listening for verbal cues, and not traveling to the sites. The disadvantages of interviewing over the telephone consisted of not meeting the participants in person, having trouble in recording the interviews, having no visibility for observing non-verbal cues, receiving limited information for summary notes, and having to spend time for transcribing the interviews.

In the study, the researcher interviewed two participants online through the use of e-mail. The advantages of interviewing through e-mail were similar to those advantages identified for the telephone interviews. These advantages included having access to participants with a busy schedule, getting responses to questions in a text-based electronic format, and getting responses from participants that were short, but distinct. The disadvantages of interviewing through e-mail interviews consisted of not being able to meet the participants in person, having no visibility to non-verbal cues, having no verbal cues, and having no summary notes directly related to the e-mail interviews.

In summary, using multiple interviewing techniques allowed the researcher to gain access to participants that traditionally may have been inaccessible (Opdenakker, 2006). In the study, the researcher asked semi-structured questions about the participants’ perceived experiences with engagement practices. The researcher found that all three methods of interviews yielded data sources and evidence for the study.
Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) recommended the researcher transcribe each recorded interview and analyze the data immediately after completion of the interview. The data were organized and analyzed based on categories from the conceptual framework for the study (recruitment, coursework, and persistence to graduation) and followed a six step generally accepted process for data analysis (Creswell, 2003; Tesch, 1990). The six steps included: (a) organizing the data, including transcribing interviews, typing up summary notes, and gathering artifacts; (b) reading all data collected, getting an overall sense of the data, and recording emerging ideas; (c) coding all data into categories; (d) using the coding to generate themes to include in analysis; (e) describing the themes that emerged from the study and using a narrative passage to describe the findings; and (f) interpreting the findings, including what was learned from the research experience.

The researcher transcribed each interview using Microsoft Word, uploaded the interview data into NVivo 8, and coded the data into categories. The interviews and summary notes were then coded into categories using tree nodes in NVivo 8 based on the components from the conceptual framework for the study. Additional categories were added as free nodes during the coding process. The researcher reviewed the data in each category and further coded the data. Overall, the data were coded using 20 tree nodes, 39 sub-nodes, and 9 free nodes. After all data coding, the researcher analyzed the data, and determined emerging themes. The researcher then described each theme using rich “thick descriptions” in the findings section of the study. Table 2 includes the number of tree nodes and subsequent entries for each major component of the study.
Table 2

*Data Analysis: Tree Nodes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Name of Tree Node</th>
<th>Number of Sub-Nodes</th>
<th>Number of Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Responsibilities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Computer Competency</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Education Objectives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career Objectives</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial Contact</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class Information</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>Course Website</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Completion</td>
<td>Celebrate Success</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Success</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data analysis included 20 tree nodes, 39 sub nodes, and 461 entries. The data for this study were coded and stored in a database using NVivo 8 software. Table 3 includes the name of the free nodes used in data coding and data analysis.

Table 3

*Data Analysis: Free Nodes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Node</th>
<th>Number of Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding Source</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodie Bags</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in Field</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned earlier, there were nine free nodes used in the study. Free nodes were not attached to one specific component of the study and were used to either support or generate new themes. Originally, career objectives was a free node, but due to the emphasis the graduates placed on career objective as a reason for participating in the
online certification program, the data were moved to a tree node under the student component and the conceptual model was updated.

Validation of Findings

To ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings from the study, Creswell (2003) suggested the researcher use several strategies including: (a) triangulation, (b) “member-checks” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 316), (c) rich, thick descriptions, (d) clarify bias, (e) present negative or discrepant information, (f) prolonged time in the field, (g) peer debriefing, and (h) external auditor (p. 196). In the study, the researcher used all eight strategies to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the findings.

Triangulation included synthesizing multiple forms of data to justify emerging themes (Merriam, 1998). In the study, the researcher synthesized multiple sources of data from the one-on-one interviews, summary notes, and collected artifacts. Additionally, the one-on-one interviews contained multiple questions related to the same topic to increase the credibility of the themes that emerged.

Member-checks were performed after transcribing each one-on-one interview and several times during the analysis of the data (Merriam, 1998). Participants were given an opportunity to read over the transcripts from their one-on-one interviews and check the transcripts for accuracy and validity. The data for the study were organized, analyzed, and summarized using the four components (student, recruitment, coursework, and program completion) of the conceptual framework and the 13 secondary research questions. Summary reports for each section were sent to the participants to verify the
accuracy and credibility of the findings. Lastly, participants were sent their profiles (including pseudonyms) and all comments that were directly related to their responses to verify for accuracy and approve for inclusion in the research document.

A rich, thick descriptive analysis allows the reader to obtain a detailed description of the case (Merriam, 1998). The analysis of the data for the study generated approximately 100 pages of text with 51 tables. The descriptive analysis allows readers to draw conclusions about the transferability of the research findings to their situations (Merriam, 1998).

Given the researcher’s role in the online certificate program, the researcher sought to design the study and report the findings with minimal bias. The researcher recognized biases prior to the study, and the researcher was cognizant that presenting the online certificate program in a negative light would not be good for the program, university, instructors, or graduates. Throughout the study, the researcher attempted to maintain the focus of the study on the participants’ perceived experiences with engagement practices. Even though the researcher had firsthand knowledge of the program and the participants prior to the study, the researcher attempted to base the findings from the study solely on information from the interviews, summary notes, and artifacts collected during the study.

Data that represented negative or discrepant information were disclosed to add credibility to the study. When interviewing the participants, there was a mix of positive and negative comments related to engagement practices regarding course discussions. These comments were accurately reported.
The researcher spent adequate “time in the field” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196) reviewing literature, interviewing graduates, transcribing the interviews, writing summary notes, collecting artifacts, coding data, analyzing data, and writing the final report. The researcher’s journey started in spring 2006 with an integrative literature review, followed by an intense interest in learning about student engagement in an online learning environment. During the study, the researcher spent adequate time in the field understanding the participants’ perceived experiences with engagement practices used in the online certificate program. The time spent conducting the face-to-face, telephone interviews, transcribing interviews, compiling summary notes, and collecting artifacts totaled 50 hours.

The study went through a peer debriefing process and an external audit with the researcher’s doctoral advising chair. The advising chair supervised the entire project and provided an assessment and feedback throughout the research study.

Ethical Considerations

The intent of the study was to give a voice to the participants who were graduates from an online certificate program. One-on-one interviews were recorded, transcribed, and upon completion of the study, digital recordings were transferred to a Compact Disc (CD) and stored in a secure location. Names of individual participants were not identified in the study. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity.

Participants were originally contacted through e-mail and were provided an Information Letter (see Appendix A) and a Participant’s Informed Consent form (see
Appendix B). Interviews were scheduled at each participant’s convenience and were semi-structured. The interviews consisted of pre-determined open-ended questions (see Appendix C), followed up with probing questions or questions to clarify the information provided when necessary. The researcher was cognizant that questions should not cause harm or discomfort for the participants. The participants were instructed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Before the start of data collection, an application for research compliance was submitted to the university where the online certificate program was offered. Upon approval, the application for exemption was sent to the Internal Review Board for Research Compliance at Clemson University. Approval was given to conduct the research study (see Appendix D).

Because the researcher for the study was a graduate, program designer, and instructor of the online certificate program, the researcher was cognizant of potential biases and minimized biases by validating the data. The researcher put forth every effort to adhere to ethical procedures when collecting and analyzing the data.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the research procedures used in the study. The research study used a qualitative, descriptive single case study design. The section on research design provided an overview of qualitative, single case study research, a description of the case, a listing of the research questions, a description of participants, and the role of the researcher. The data collection section covered a description of the principles for collecting case study data, six sources of evidence, data collection components used in
the study, and multiple methods of interviewing. The study included face-to-face, telephone, and online interviews, summary notes, and a collection of artifacts. The section on data analysis included a description of the six steps utilized for data analysis, validation of findings, and ethical considerations. The data analysis generated 53 emergent themes.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to report the findings from a comprehensive analysis of data collected during a single case study on graduates from an online certificate program regarding their experiences related to engagement practices. The analysis was based on recommended steps for analyzing qualitative data (Creswell, 2003; Tesch, 1990). The steps included (a) organizing the data and transcribing interviews; (b) reading all transcripts, summarizing notes, and reviewing artifacts; (c) coding interviews and summary notes; (d) using the codes to generate themes; (e) describing the themes that emerged and describing the findings using a narrative passage; and (f) interpreting the findings and describing what was learned from the research study.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the analysis of the case, followed by a description of the single case and the demographic variables of the participants at the time they were students in the online certificate program. The demographic variables were gender, age, location, responsibilities, computer competency, educational objectives, and career objectives. The next three sections cover an analysis of the data related to engagement practices focusing on recruitment and coursework through course completion. A narrative format with interpretations of the findings and descriptions of the emergent themes were presented for each section. The data were analyzed and organized using the secondary research questions and the conceptual framework as guides.
The central, overarching question that guided this research was as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices? The secondary research questions were as follows:

Recruitment
1. What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?
2. What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?
3. What did the participants experience when registering for courses?
4. What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?
5. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Coursework
6. How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?
7. How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?
8. What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?
9. How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

10. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

Program Completion

11. How did the participants celebrate success?

12. What did the participants experience at graduation time?

13. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community to celebrate success?

The chapter concludes with a summary of findings and emergent themes resulting from the comprehensive analysis of the data for this single case study.

Case Analysis of Graduates from an Online Certificate Program

A single case study research method was employed to explore the graduates’ perceived experiences with engagement practices in an online certificate program. The analysis of the study was completed using data from interviews, summary notes, and artifacts collected during the study. The participants were interviewed and answered questions related to their demographics at the start of the program, engagement practices related to recruitment, engagement practices related to their coursework, and engagement practices at the point of their program completion.
Description of Case

The study explored participants’ perceived experiences with engagement practices related to recruitment and coursework through program completion from an undergraduate online certification program. The program was originally designed in collaboration with a local healthcare organization as an educational tool that targeted individuals without an educational background in leadership and management. The intent of the program was to provide a foundation in health care management for supervisory and management level staff using an outcome-based approach to developing management skills.

Originally, the university agreed to offer two courses per semester exclusively to staff members of the healthcare organization at its facility. In return, the healthcare organization guaranteed tuition for 15 students per semester for each course. The certificate program consisted of four related courses: (a) *Principles of Health Care Management*, (b) *Legal, Ethical, and Regulatory Aspects of Health Care*, (c) *Financial Aspects of Health Care*, and (d) *Supervision and Human Resource Management*. Each course was equivalent to three credit hours. Participants were required to receive a ‘C’ or better for each course in order to receive the certificate of completion.

Approval for the courses and the certificate program offering were obtained through the university’s curriculum approval process, however, the administrators of the healthcare organization did not finalize a contract that was a part of the approval requirement. The major concern with finalizing the contract centered on the time commitment on the part of the staff. Consequently, the program became available to
other health care professionals in management positions or professionals interested in
pursuing a health care management position in the future.

The online certificate program commenced in fall 2003 and between fall 2003 and
spring 2008, 81 students enrolled in courses and 17 students graduated from the program.
Out of the 17 graduates, 13 participated in the study. The graduates were chosen to
participate in the study because they successfully completed the online certificate
program and had first-hand experiences with engagement practices related to recruitment
and coursework through program completion. The following narrative passage of the
participants began when the participants were potential students considering starting the
program.

Introduction to Participants in the Study

Thirteen graduates from the online certificate program participated in the study.
An introduction for each participant is included in this section. Demographics relating to
the participants at the start of the certificate program are included. All participants
worked and lived in the state of South Carolina during the program. Pseudonyms were
assigned for each participant to protect his or her identity.

Participants of the Study

Sally was 48 years of age and had a full-time job as director of nursing at a local
nursing home and often worked a 60 hours per work. The majority of the time she
accessed materials for her courses at night and on the weekends. Sally mentioned that she
logged on several times at work, but only during lunchtime at work. Sally was transparent with her co-workers about what she was doing. Sally described her computer competency as a touch typist. She was familiar with Excel, as she had taken Excel classes before taking the *Financial Aspects of Health Care* course. Sally had many responsibilities. In addition to her 60 hour per week job, she had one or two children at home depending on who was home from college at the time. Sally was very active in her church. She attended church services or other religious activities on Wednesday nights and Sundays. Her educational objective was to complete the certificate program and her career objective was to become an administrator at the nursing home.

Cindy was 38 years of age and had a full-time job at a local medical facility. Her career objective was to seek advancement in the health care field. She had family and work responsibilities. Cindy accessed materials for the courses from home and had basic computer skills. Cindy’s educational goals were to complete the certificate program and earn a bachelor’s of science in nursing (BSN) degree.

Sherry was 35 years of age and had a full-time job tracking quality data and doing project management for the heart services group at a local health care facility. She had other responsibilities including being a mother of three children and as well as a soccer mom. Sherry accessed the course websites mainly at night and described her computer and application competency as “pretty advanced.” At the beginning of the program, Sherry’s educational objective was to further her knowledge in health care management. Her career objective was to increase her knowledge in the financial aspects of health care, more specifically, budgeting.
Michelle was 49 years of age and had a full-time job at a local health care facility. Michelle had family responsibilities and at the same time was studying to take an examination for certification in her occupational field. Michelle logged onto the course websites at home and described her computer competency as “just average.” Michelle’s educational objective was to obtain the certificate. Michelle’s career objective was to advance at work to the level of supervisor.

Evelyn was 53 years of age and had a full-time job as a chief executive officer (CEO) at a local hospital. In addition, she was a wife, mother, and had many different responsibilities. Evelyn accessed the course websites predominately from home. Sometimes she responded to the weekly discussions at work during lunchtime. Evelyn described her computer competency as basic and her application competency as “not very good.” Evelyn’s educational objective was to obtain an update of health care issues and “hot topics.”

Wade was 40 years of age and was the director of registration and counseling services at a local hospital. In addition to his full-time job, Wade was the Treasurer for the Booster club and had responsibilities at his church. Other responsibilities included camping, driving, and car modeling. At home, Wade had yard work while his wife took care of the laundry, food, and other things around the house. In addition, his wife was the primary caregiver for their four children. Wade logged onto the course websites at home and described his computer competency as average. Wade commented that he had used other applications “a little bit.” Wade’s educational objective was to complete the certificate program and continue working toward an associate’s degree and eventually a
bachelor’s degree. Wade was in the position of director without a degree and thought getting the online certificate would give him a head start toward earning a degree.

Shannon was 40 years of age and had a full-time job as director of research at a local hospital. She was a wife and a mom. Shannon accessed the course websites from home and described her computer competency as good. Shannon commented that she used computers on a daily basis. Shannon’s educational objective was to complete the certificate program.

Joyce was 41 years of age and worked full-time as a systems administrator responsible for supporting software used at a local hospital. She had a husband and three children, one a senior in high school and two daughters that were freshman in high school. Joyce accessed the course websites from home. Computers were Joyce’s specialty. She described her computer competency as high. Joyce said, “It’s always been high.” Joyce’s educational objective was to “get her feet wet” and eventually to get an advanced degree.

Bonnie was 27 years of age and started the program working full-time as a staff nurse. During the program, Bonnie received a promotion to that of supervisor, and before completing the program, she became a manager. At home, Bonnie was a full-time mom. She accessed the course websites from home and considered herself competent when using a computer. Bonnie’s educational objective was to further her educational goals by earning a bachelor’s of science degree in nursing (BSN), and her career objectives were to build a foundation in health care and to advance her career.

Lorrie was 37 years of age and worked full-time as a charge nurse in radiology at
a local hospital. In addition to her full-time job, she was responsible for two children at home. Lorrie accessed the course websites from both home and work with basic computer competency. Lorrie’s educational objective was to obtain a bachelor’s of science degree in nursing (BSN), and in the process, complete the online certificate program.

Bill was 29 years of age and was married to Kellye, another graduate of the online certificate program. Bill had a full-time job and responsibilities at home. At the time of the program, Bill and Kellye had no children. Bill logged onto the course websites from both work and home. Bill described his computer competency as “pretty competent” and could use Excel. Bill’s educational objective was to complete the certificate program, and his career objective was to advance in his job.

Kellye was 27 years of age and was married to Bill. She registered for the certificate program once Bill completed the program. Kellye worked full-time at the local hospital. She accessed the course websites from home and considered herself to be “pretty good” in using computers. In addition, Kellye had taken an Excel course before, so she was familiar with the application, but she said it “took a little practice.” Kellye’s educational objective was to understand decisions her superiors had to make on a daily basis and to understand health care from their points of view. Her career objective was career advancement, and to be ready if a position became available in the future.

Susan was 32 years of age and had a full-time job as an elementary school teacher during the first year of the program. Susan transitioned to a public health position during the second year. Susan logged onto classes from home and described her computer
competency as being “efficient.” Susan’s educational objective was to familiarize herself with health care topics. Susan held an undergraduate degree in early childhood/elementary education and a master’s degree in public health education.

Summary of Participants’ Demographics

The demographics include the participants’ gender, age, location, responsibilities, computer competency, educational objectives, and career objectives. Descriptive narratives and tables are provided for demographics.

Gender

Thirteen graduates from the online certificate program participated in the study. Eleven of the participants were female (84.6%) and two were male (15.4%).

Age

At the start of the online certificate program, the participants ranged in age from 27 years of age to 53 years of age. Table 4 provides a summary of participants’ ages at the start of the online certificate program.
Table 4

Age of Participants at Start of Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Age at Start of Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>25 – 34</td>
<td>27, 27, 29, 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 – 44</td>
<td>35, 37, 38, 40, 40, 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 – 54</td>
<td>48, 49, 53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Evelyn, who started the program at 53 years of age commented, “I am sure that most of the people that took the program were younger than I.” When asked why she thought everyone was younger, she hesitated and then laughed. She had never met any of the other students face-to-face, and unless they mentioned their ages in their introductions, she had no way of knowing. She then realized she was associating age with how she perceived the students’ work experiences based on course discussions.

Location

The participants were asked to identify the location where they routinely accessed the program. The participants lived in 11 different cities in South Carolina. The cities included Aiken, Anderson, Bradley, Columbia, Elgin, Gaston, Gilbert, Greenwood, Lexington, Ninety Six, and Rock Hill. Table 5 provides a summary of the location, region, and city where participants routinely accessed the online certificate program.
Table 5

Location Where Participants Routinely Accessed the Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>City</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>Aiken, Columbia, Elgin, Gaston, Gilbert, Lexington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>Anderson, Bradley, Greenwood, Ninety Six, Rock Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Midlands</td>
<td>Winnsboro, Lexington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Upstate</td>
<td>Anderson, Rock Hill</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One participant was located in each city with the exception of Lexington and Columbia, which had two participants in each city. All participants worked on the course websites from home. Four participants reported accessing the websites at both home and work. Evelyn and Sally accessed the course websites at work, but only logged on during lunchtime. Evelyn commented, “I did log on a few times here at work during my lunchtime for the discussions.” Sally indicated that she was cautious and notified her secretary that she was on lunch break, closed her door, and then worked on the discussions. Once done she would open her door and let her secretary know she was back from lunch. Lorrie and Bill logged on from work, but did not specify the time of day.

Responsibility

All of the participants had full-time jobs and families. The majority of the participants had church and community responsibilities. Evelyn laughed when asked this question and commented, “I was a CEO of a hospital, wife, mother, lots of
responsibility.” In fact, the first time she heard about the program she was a little overwhelmed at work and did not sign up. The next time she received a letter in the mail explaining the program. She decided, “I can do this.” Evelyn was 53 years old and had not completed a bachelor’s degree, but the online certificate program was something she wanted to achieve and the timing was right. Evelyn said for her it was “all about timing.”

When Wade was asked the question on responsibilities, a chuckle could be heard from the other room where his wife was reading a book. Wade smiled and then responded, “I was the director of registration and counseling services, treasurer for the Booster club, church, camping, driving, and car modeling.” When asked about the children, Wade said, “there were four,” and further explained that “they didn’t add to his responsibilities.” Wade gave the impression that the children were mainly his wife’s responsibility, which he confirmed was correct at the end of the interview.

Joyce was a systems administrator at a hospital with responsibility for supporting software applications. She was extremely busy at work. During the phone interview, Joyce was not only answering the researcher’s questions, she also had other conversations going at the same time. Joyce was a juggler and constantly multitasked. When asked about responsibilities, she responded, “At home, I had three children, one a senior in high school and two freshmen; and a husband, count him.” Joyce laughed after the comment about her husband.

Sally commented, “I was a mom and a wife. My teenage college-aged kids were either living with me, or not, depending on when I was taking courses.” Right in the middle of answering the question, as if on cue, Sally’s daughter walked in with a big bag
full of laundry. Greetings were exchanged, as well as introductions, and then Sally continued, “I was also a full-time director of nursing at a nursing home, which involved about 60 hours a week. In addition, I had responsibilities at church on Wednesday nights and Sundays.”

When asked the question on responsibilities, a quick glance around the room told Sherry’s story. Sherry’s office was once a patient room in the main hospital. She looked organized, but it was obvious she was not comfortable with the limited space in her office. It seemed like a temporary situation that became permanent and she was making due the best she could. Sherry looked over the stack of papers and rolled her eyes, then smiled, and answered the question.

At the time, I was a mother of three. I had three active children, and I had a full-time job. I worked forty-hours a week. I did quality data and project management for the heart services group at the hospital. Soccer mom, full-time everything, so most of my time online was spent at home at night.

Table 6, Work Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program, Table 7, Family Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program, and Table 8, Other Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program provide summaries of the participants responsibilities.
### Table 6

*Work Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Director of Nursing at a nursing home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurse / Charge Nurse at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data and Project Management for Heart Services at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Histology Technician at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Registration and Counseling Services at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Director of Research at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systems Administrator for Software at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transitioned from Staff Nurse to Supervisor and then to Manager at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nuclear Medicine / Computed Tomography Technologist at a hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary school teacher in the public school system</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants were employed in full-time health care positions, except for Susan, who started the program as an elementary school teacher and transitioned to a public health position during the program. The majority of participants maintained a management or executive position at a local health care facility.
Table 7

*Family Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother with one, two, three, or four children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife / Husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>House and yard</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All of the participants had family and home responsibilities while enrolled in the program. The majority of participants had children and a spouse living at home.

Table 8

*Other Responsibilities the Participants Had During the Online Certificate Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church on Wednesday night and Sundays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taking other college courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Studying for a certification examination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treasurer for Booster club, camping, driving, car modeling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the participants had church and community responsibilities while enrolled in the program. Additionally, Cindy, Lorrie, and Bonnie were pursuing a bachelor’s of science degree in nursing (BSN) and Michelle was studying for a certification examination.
**Computer Competency**

Participants started the online certificate program with varying degrees of computer competency ranging from a basic level to an advanced level. The question was open-ended and gave the participants an opportunity to self-report their computer competency. Table 9 shows brief descriptions of the participants’ computer competency by level of experience.

Table 9

*Computer Competency of Participants at Start of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Experience</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Touch typing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimal; Basic competency level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little more than basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Just average</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretty competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pretty good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>Good, use computer daily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>I’m not an expert but I am pretty advanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It was high; It’s always been high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Efficient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All participants had at least a basic level of computer competency since it was a requirement in order to register for the online certificate program. Sally, Cindy, Evelyn, and Lorrie had a basic level of experience. Michelle, Wade, Bill, and Kellye had an average level of experience. Shannon and Bonnie had an above average level of experience. Sherry, Joyce, and Susan had an advanced level of experience.

In addition to the participants’ computer competency, participants had various levels of experience with Microsoft applications such as Windows, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Internet Explorer. Table 10 provides a summary of statements made by the participants by level of experience.
### Table 10

**Competency With Microsoft Applications for Participants at Start of Program**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>I can access programs and do e-mail. I’m not very good at specialty programs like Excel. I used a little bit of Word, Excel, and PowerPoint Excel, it took a little practice but I had taken a course before so I knew the basics I could use Excel but not much</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>I took Excel courses before I took the finance course but I learned to search the internet as part of the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>Yes, I could use Excel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>I have a great knowledge of most Microsoft applications. Excel was not a challenge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A prerequisite for the program was that all participants had at least a basic level of experience with Microsoft applications such as Word, Excel, and Powerpoint. Excel was used extensively in the *Financial Aspects of Health Care* course, which posed a challenge for some of the participants. Evelyn, Wade, Kellye, and Lorrie had a basic level of application experience using the computer, while Sally had an average level of experience. Bill described his computer application competency as above average and
Sherry described her application competency as advanced. Cindy, Michelle, Shannon, Joyce, Bonnie, and Susan did not address application competency when answering the question on computer competency.

*Educational Objectives*

When starting the program, the majority of the participants’ primary educational objective was to complete the certificate program. Participants also had secondary educational objectives. Table 11 provides a summary of the participants’ educational objectives.

Table 11

*Educational Objectives of Participants at Start of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Objective</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program completion</td>
<td>To complete the certificate program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work on RN to BSN degree in future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>Working on BSN and decided to complete the certificate program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of content</td>
<td>To understand the decisions my superiors make on a daily basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Update on topics covered by the online certificate program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bonnie, Cindy, and Lorrie were in a program pursuing the bachelor’s of science in nursing (BSN) degree, and used the credits from the certificate program to fulfill their elective requirements. Wade, Shannon, and Joyce were interested in an online bachelor’s degree
program and took the online certificate program as a first step. Their goals were to complete their certificate programs, and if successful, continue their education and obtain bachelor’s degrees in a health care related field. Wade, Joyce, Shannon, Bonnie, Lorrie, and Evelyn mentioned they did not have bachelor’s degrees at the time they were taking courses in the online certificate program.

Wade explained, “I was already in the director’s position without a degree. I was grandfathered in.” From the conversation, it was obvious that Wade wanted to get his bachelor’s degree, but he wanted to take a small step first. He felt that “getting the certificate would give him a head start to getting a bachelor’s degree.”

Shannon was professional and confident when answering the interview questions. Her educational objective was “to complete the management certificate program.” Later in the interview, she explained the importance of her completing the program. Shannon said, “It was a reaffirmation for me that I could go back to school. I had a fear; I didn’t like school the first time. It kept me from going back again.” At the end of the interview, Shannon added, “I think the instructors did a fabulous job, and I would recommend it [the online certificate program] to anybody that had doubts as to whether to go back to college or not.”

Joyce was so excited to talk about her experiences with the online certificate program. When asked about her educational objectives, she said, “I wanted to get my feet wet going back to school so I could get my bachelor’s degree later.” She then laughed and said, “I got talked into it-- to tell you the truth.” When questioned who talked her into taking the certificate program, Joyce responded, “Shannon talked me into it.” We both
had a good laugh.

Sherry, Evelyn, Kellye, and Susan were interested in learning about the topics taught in the program. Sherry explained, “I wanted to further my knowledge in the management aspects of health care and take some basic courses on how to manage.” Evelyn was interested in updating her skills and knowledge. Evelyn commented, “I wanted to get an update on those areas that were covered in the program to see…how much things had changed, and what were the hot topics in health care.” Susan was interested in changing her career. Susan explained, “I wanted to become more familiar with health care as I was transitioning from an elementary school classroom teacher into a public health position.” Kellye wanted to learn more about health care from a management perspective. Kellye commented,

I wanted to get a better understanding of health care management. What kind of decisions my superiors had to make in their jobs on a daily basis, as well as, how they dealt with big issues that came along. I wanted to understand things from their points of view.

Career Objectives

Participants entering the online certificate program discussed their career objectives. Table 12 includes a summary of the participants’ career objectives.
### Table 12

*Career Objectives of Participants at Start of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Objectives</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>Career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase knowledge in field</td>
<td>Gain knowledge on how to handle the financial part of health care, especially budgets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learn to interact with my peers at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understand more from my superior’s point of view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In a management or executive position without a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career change</td>
<td>Career change from elementary school teacher to public health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sally, Cindy, Michelle, Joyce, Bonnie, Lorrie, Bill, Kellye, and Susan were interested in completing the program in order to advance in their careers. Shannon, Wade, Bonnie, and Evelyn were in management or executive positions without bachelor’s degrees. As a requirement for their positions, Shannon and Wade needed to pursue additional education and eventually obtain bachelor’s degrees. Sherry was interested in gaining knowledge on how to handle financial aspects of health care, especially budgets, while Kellye wanted to learn to interact with peers at work. In addition, Kellye wanted to understand more from her superior’s point of view. Susan envisioned a career change from an elementary school teacher to a public health worker.
Engagement Practices Related to Recruitment

This section of the case analysis includes a narrative on perceptions of the participants regarding engagement practices related to recruitment. Recruitment included (a) marketing methods that attracted the participants to the online certificate program, (b) initial contact with faculty, (c) experiences when registering for courses, (d) importance of course information, and (e) interactions with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase. Secondary research questions one through five addressed engagement practices related to recruitment.

Secondary Research Question 1: Marketing

The following secondary research question related to marketing helped to guide the study.

What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on marketing.

(a) How did you first hear about the certificate program?

(b) What attracted you to the program?

Summary Notes

When participants were asked the question on how did you first hear about the certificate program, the mood changed and the participants became serious, yet relieved.
The participants were perceived serious because they knew the information was very important to the study, and relieved because they could answer the question. The participants transformed in time, going back to the time when they started the program and told their stories. As they told their stories, the participants became more comfortable and relaxed.

*Artifacts*

Artifacts were collected related to the secondary research question on marketing. Marketing of the online certificate program consisted of letters, brochures, e-mails, articles in the newspaper, and the program website. After collecting the artifacts, each artifact was reviewed for content.

Letters and brochures were sent to administrators of South Carolina’s hospitals and nursing homes during the summer. The letters contained a brief summary of the program and explained the convenience of taking online courses. The brochures described the online certificate program, the admissions process, the address for the program’s website, and contact information for the program’s faculty. Nursing students received e-mails that explained the program and how courses could be used as electives for the nursing program. In addition, an article was obtained and reviewed that announced the program. The article was printed in several major newspapers in South Carolina.
Interviews—How did you first hear about the certificate program?

Sherry, Wade, Shannon, Joyce, and Kellye heard about the online certificate program through word of mouth. Kellye heard about the program from her husband, a graduate of the program. Sherry and Joyce heard about the program from individuals at their hospitals. Wade and Shannon talked with a program faculty member at the hospital where they worked.

In addition to word of mouth, several participants mentioned they first heard about the program through other marketing methods. Sally and Evelyn received brochures in the mail, and Cindy and Lorrie received e-mail notifications from the department where the bachelor’s of science in nursing program resides. Bill and Sherry searched the internet, located the program’s website, and read about the program online. One participant read about the program on the front page of the Index Journal, and another participant read an article about the program in The State newspaper.

Table 13 provides a summary of marketing methods that participants mentioned during the interviews. Overwhelmingly, participants indicated word-of-mouth.
Table 13

*Marketing Methods--Participants First Heard About Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Word of mouth</td>
<td>1) Word of mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brochure in the mail to local health care professionals</td>
<td>2) Local, low cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mail notification to bachelor's of science in nursing students</td>
<td>3) Targeted health care professionals and nursing students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation at workplace</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes for how the participants first heard about the program were through *word of mouth*, and focused on *local, low cost* marketing methods. Additionally, marketing methods *targeted health care professionals and nursing students*. The most prevalent method of how the participants first heard about the program was *word of mouth*.

*Interviews--What attracted you to the program?*

The participants reflected on the time when they first learned of the program, and what attracted them to the particular program. Sherry thought for a minute. It was as if she were going back in time in her mind. Sherry responded,

The fact that the program was at my own pace and I could access it online attracted me to the program. I could pretty much do it at home, online, and
I did not have to attend class. I could do my assignments when it was convenient for me.

Sherry was very busy and only had time in the evenings to work on coursework. An online program was perfect given her schedule and other responsibilities.

Sally sat in a comfortable chair at her kitchen table. She was very relaxed and explained that she was attracted to the program because she “could do it at home in her free time and it wasn’t scheduled.” Sally showed me the exact spot where she accessed the course websites. On one side of the room was her desk and computer and the other side of the room was her husband’s desk and computer. In fact, her husband sat at his desk reading the Sunday paper while the interview was being conducted.

The online certificate program attracted the participants because of the subject matter and the potential for career advancement in the future. Evelyn explained that she liked to keep her skills updated and found that the online program was a perfect match for her next educational pursuit. Evelyn described what attracted her to the program.

The program included current major aspects of what my role entails and since I do not have a college degree, it was one way to validate the information I had and thought I knew about those areas. It was just a good way and I did not have to travel being able to do it on location. If I had to travel to the university, I would not have done it because it is so far. I like challenges and going forward. I like to do something once a year, if I can, that is major.

Joyce and Shannon were trying to decide whether to pursue a career in hospital
administration. Joyce decided to “follow the leader” and register for the online certificate program. Joyce thought the program sounded interesting and was attracted to the program because it provided her an opportunity to advance her knowledge and management skills pertaining to ethics and financial aspects. Joyce was unfamiliar in her current role with these subjects. The certificate program attracted Shannon because it was online and the program “seemed like a very balanced program between business and health care management.”

Michelle was so excited to get a chance to tell her story. She learned about the program from reading a local newspaper. She described how she was attracted to the program.

The way the article was written in the local newspaper-- it just grabbed my attention because at the time I felt that if I had what they were offering in the program, I would have a good chance of…advancing in my position. Further, when I talked to the program director she was so excited and so was the program faculty member. It was right at the deadline and the program faculty member came over to the hospital and helped me fill out the papers. Both the program director and program faculty member were really great.

Bill and Kellye, the two participants who were married to one another expressed why they were attracted to the program. Bill was first to register for the program and completed the program. Once Bill completed the program, Kellye signed up for the program and subsequently completed the program. Contacting the couple was difficult
and interviewing face-to-face was impossible as they had an 11-month-old baby at home. In addition, they both worked full-time. Bill and Kellye completed telephone interviews on the same night. In response to the question, Bill answered, “I was trying to get some education for career advancement.” Kellye responded,

I liked the fact that it was easy to get the work done, as far as, we could do it online. It was somewhat self-paced. We had deadlines and we had things we had to do by a certain time, but I liked the fact you could do it yourself. You did not have to go to a location and show up at the same time several times a week. It was a lot easier being able to do it online.

Michelle and Wade acknowledged the excitement they felt when talking with the program director and program faculty member. In addition, participants pointed out that the first couple of semesters a program faculty member came to local hospitals and helped register potential students. Cindy from the bachelor’s of science in nursing program commented, “I thought the online certificate program was a good option.”

Table 14 provides a summary of reasons participants were attracted to the online certificate program. Reasons focused on convenience of the delivery methodology.
Table 14

*Marketing—Reasons Attracted to Online Certificate Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online; no classes face-to-face; no synchronous class meetings</td>
<td>1) Convenience of online offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work on course from home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make own schedule; self-paced; do assignments when convenient</td>
<td>2) Emergent topics in health care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics related to work; possible career advancement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program faculty excited about program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good option for BSN electives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes related to reasons the participants were attracted to the online certificate program included the *convenience of an online offering* and participants learned about *emergent topics in health care*. Studying emergent topics in health care provided participants an opportunity for career advancement in the future.

*Secondary Research Question 2: Initial Contact*

The following secondary research question guided the inquiry related to initial contacts with faculty.

What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on initial contact.
(a) How did you decide to sign up for the program?

(b) What did you experience during your initial contact with faculty prior to registering for courses?

Summary Notes

The participants did not hesitate when answering the questions on initial contact. The participants wanted to reminisce and tell the complete story. All of the participants remembered having a positive interaction and several of the participants smiled as they answered the questions. One participant laughed as she told her story.

Interviews—How did you decide to sign up for the program?

The participants started by telling about the method of their initial contact. In addition to the method of initial contact, participants described the context of the initial contact, which helped the participants to decide to sign up for the program.

Method of initial contact. Each participant told a story of how he/she decided to sign up for the online certificate program. Nine participants’ (i.e., Sherry, Michelle, Evelyn, Joyce, Bonnie, Lorrie, Bill, Kellye, and Susan) initial contact was with the program director, while Wade and Shannon talked in person with a program faculty member. Sally tore off the request for more information section of the brochure, sent it to the university, and was then contacted by the program director. Cindy from the BSN program expressed an interest to her advisor. Cindy’s advisor notified the program
director for the online certificate program, and before the participant could register for a course, the program director called her on the telephone.

Table 15 provides a summary of methods used for initial contact. The initial contact elicited responses in each case.

Table 15

*Decision to Sign Up for Program--Method of Initial Contact*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Telephone call to program director</td>
<td>Contacted program director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked in person with program faculty member</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submitted the form requesting more information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from the back page of program brochure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressed an interest to advisor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme related to decisions to sign up for the program focusing on methods of initial contact centered on the program director. In general, the participants *contacted the program director* to learn about the online certificate program.

*Context of initial contact.* Each participant was provided information about the online certificate program and an explanation of how the online process works during his/her initial contact with faculty from the online certificate program. The program director talked with participants prior to registration to determine if their backgrounds were a ‘fit’ for the program, and if qualified, the program director explained the steps on
how to register. Initially, the registration process was not online and the program director and a program faculty member helped participants fill out registration paperwork, and delivered the paperwork to the registration office at the university.

Evelyn knew the timing was right for her to take on the challenge of the online certificate program, but hesitated at first, not knowing if she was right for the program. She told her story of her initial contact with the program director. Evelyn said, “I shared my background, and I was told I was the type of person [for whom]…the program was designed. I really thought about the program….I had been looking for an update on emergent health care topics.” After talking with the program director, Evelyn decided to register for the online certificate program.

Sherry commented, “I talked with the program director about the program in detail…she sent me all the information and signed me up” She also stated, “The program director explained everything to me. I understood everything I was getting into, I understood how much time it was going to involve, and the important stuff such as being self-disciplined when taking an online course.”

Joyce expressed her delight with the program director and at the same time her concern for the cost of the program. She found the program director helpful and at the end of the conversation, her questions were answered. Joyce described the interaction, I had a great advisor [program director]. I was well aware of exactly what the requirements were for the certificate program and what the responsibilities were going to be from me as well as the cost, which was a big factor too. I was very concerned how much it was going to cost to take
the classes….The program director outlined the benefits of the website
and showed me what I could use in the online library. I took a virtual tour.

Table 16 provides a summary of the context of the interactions between the
program director or program faculty member and participants during his/her initial
contact. The context of initial contact included interest on the part of each participant.

Table 16

Decision to Sign Up for Program--Context of Initial Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provided information about the online certificate</td>
<td>1) Expressed an interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program including expectations and costs</td>
<td>2) Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about how the online process works</td>
<td>3) Assessed ‘fit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determined if background of potential student was a ‘fit’ for the program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explained specific steps to be registered</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went out of way to get potential students registration paperwork</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interviews--What did you experience during your initial contact with faculty prior to registering for a course?

Tone of initial contact. Participants stated they had a positive experience during their initial contacts with the program director and program faculty member. Participants found that the program director and the program faculty members were knowledgeable about the program and were helpful in the admission and registration process.

Michelle made a point to praise the program director and program faculty member. She said, “The program director was really nice and the program faculty member went out of his way and came to where I worked. He was like--fill out these papers, and I’ll take them over to the university.” Sherry felt like “the program director was very knowledgeable in all aspects of the program.” She found it refreshing to “have somebody to talk to about how the online process works.” Lorrie summed up the feelings of the other participants by saying, “Actually most of my experiences with university faculty prior to, during, and after the program, were good.”

Table 17 provides a summary of the description of the tone of the initial interaction between participants and the program director or program faculty member. Participants briefly described their experiences during the initial contact with faculty.
Table 17

Experiences During Initial Contact With Faculty--Tone of Initial Contact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very positive</td>
<td>Helpful, friendly atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable in all aspects of the program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theme for the tone of initial contact, between the participants and the program director or program faculty member, emerged as a *helpful, friendly atmosphere*. Overall, participants had a great experience during their initial contacts. Participants described the program director and program faculty members as being very positive, welcoming, and knowledgeable.

*Secondary Research Question 3: Registration*

The following secondary research question related to engagement practices categorized as registration.

What did the participants experience when registering for courses?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on registration.

(a) How did you go about registering and paying for courses?

(b) What did you experience when registering for courses?
Summary Notes

Participants thought for a couple of seconds and when they answered the questions on registration, the answers were short and to the point. The participants were very satisfied with the process and very appreciative that the process was transparent and a non-event.

Artifacts

One artifact was collected related to registration. A letter dated, December 16, 2004, was sent to students who pre-registered for the spring 2005 semester. The letter provided information on paying tuition, buying books, and logging onto the course websites. In addition, the letter explained how to contact the program director during the break between the fall and spring semesters.

Interviews--How did you go about registering and paying for courses?

Kellye commented, “It was all online. I registered online and paid online. It was all taken care of over the Internet. I didn’t have to go to campus.” In contrast, Sherry had to go on campus to have paperwork signed for a student loan program. Even though Sherry had to go on campus, she found “everything was a breeze” from buying books to waiting in line for the registrar to sign and stamp her student loan documents. Other participants were thankful the process was online, and described the process as quick, and easy.
Table 18 provides a summary of the experiences the participants had while registering and paying for courses. Participants’ comments were brief but informative.

Table 18

Registering and Paying for Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did everything online; paid online;</td>
<td>Quick, easy, and online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never had to come to campus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very quick, easy to figure out</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paid over the telephone using debit card</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books sent through mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went to campus for books, and to pay some</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fees; everything was a breeze</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme related to registering and paying for courses was described as *quick, easy, and online*. Overall, the majority of participants reported they had no problems when registering or paying for courses.

*Interviews--What did you experience when registering for courses?*

Cindy, Shannon, Joyce, Kellye, and Susan contacted university faculty to ask questions and ask for assistance during the registration process. They found the university
faculty was helpful. The university faculty released course holds, answered questions, resolved problems, and assisted in the registration process at the start of the online certificate program.

Table 19 provides a summary of the experiences the participants had when registering for courses. Participants were complimentary of the faculty and advisors for their support during registration.

Table 19

Experiences When Registering for Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty helpful</td>
<td>Faculty helpful and responsive to participants’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty mailed registration form and fee information</td>
<td>participants’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisor available to help students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme related to experiences when registering for courses was that faculty was helpful and responsive to participants’ needs. Program faculty and BSN advisors were available to help the participants with questions related to registration.

Secondary Research Question 4: Course Information

The following secondary research question guided the inquiry related to course information.
What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on course information.

(a) What course information was most important to you before the start of each course?

(b) How did you use this information?

Artifacts

Artifacts were collected related to the courses. The artifacts included syllabi and topic/date outlines for each course in the online certificate program. Syllabi consisted of instructor contact information, required text, supplemental materials, prerequisites, catalog course descriptions, course objectives, attendance requirements, grading, teaching methods, academic honor code, student disabilities, topical issues, skills, and web resources. The topic/date outlines consisted of week start and end dates, topics, assignments, and number of possible points that could be earned for each week of the course. The assignments section included readings, assignments, quizzes, PowerPoint slides, and discussion topics. Names of discussion coordinators were included under the discussion topic for each week.

Interviews—What course information was most important to you before the start of each course?
Eleven participants responded that syllabi, including topic/date outlines were the most important documents at the start of each course. Additionally, participants mentioned sections of syllabi and the topic/date outlines that were important including (a) course expectations, (b) books required for courses, (c) course objectives, (d) subject matter, (e) course assignments, and (f) due dates for quizzes and assignments.

*Interviews--How did you use this information?*

At the beginning of each course, participants found the information on syllabi and topic/date outlines to be most important. The participants used the information to purchase books, develop a schedule of due dates, understand expectations for the course, and to be prepared ahead of time. Bill commented that having this information helped him to research topics before the start of a discussion.

The majority of participants found the information in the syllabi and the topic/date outlines allowed them to manage their time. Shannon commented, “I used the calendars a lot.” When Sally was asked what she found most important, she explained,

The syllabi--when things were due. I printed the syllabi out and put important dates on my calendar to make sure I was getting things done on time. I also liked it when the program faculty would open things up early so I could work ahead. That way if I knew I was going to have a busy week at work or if I was going to be on vacation, I could get the assignments done ahead of time.
Susan, similar to Sally, was interested in completing assignments ahead of time. She responded,

Yes, I used the syllabi to help manage my time and to know what was expected--how many points per discussion, what was needed in a discussion, etc. Since I was working full-time, I had to make sure I was one-step ahead.

In contrast, Wade explained that he did not use the syllabi for time management. He was more concerned with expectations than any type of time management. Wade was very confident and shared how he managed his time. He set aside time at night for discussions and set aside time on the weekends for his assignments and quizzes. He managed his time but not with a calendar. To him, using a calendar seemed like a waste of time.

Wade felt that knowing the subject matter was the most important information at the start of a course. He commented, “Subject matter…so I could mentally prepare to be in the right frame of mind to start discussing topics.”

Cindy found course objectives located on syllabi most important. She commented, “Incorporated the syllabi and the course objectives into the assignments. These tools helped to guide me and keep me focused.”

Table 20 provides a summary of the information related to courses that the participants reported as most important. In addition, the table includes how the course information was used at the beginning of a course.
Table 20

Course Information--Most Important and Use of Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Important Information</th>
<th>Use of Information</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syllabi and topic/date</td>
<td>Develop calendars</td>
<td>1) Syllabi and topic/date outlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>outlines</td>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>2) Time Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course expectations</td>
<td>Be prepared ahead of time</td>
<td>3) Prepare ahead of schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>Purchase books</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course objectives</td>
<td>Helped to guide participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject matter</td>
<td>Prepare mentally for discussing topics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course assignments</td>
<td>Completed assignments ahead of schedule</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Due dates for quizzes and assignments</td>
<td>Knew when quizzes and assignments due</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme related to course information that was considered by the participants as most important was the *syllabi and topic/date outlines*. The emergent themes for how the information was used were for *time management purposes* and to *prepare ahead of schedule*.

Secondary Research Question 5: Recruitment

The following secondary research question guided the section on recruitment.
What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

The participants were asked one question related to the secondary research question on course information.

(a) What interactions did you have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community before the first day of class?

*Interviews—What interactions did you have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community before the first day of class?*

The majority of participants interacted with faculty members from the university. Wade and Susan interacted by telephone and e-mail with both the program director and a program faculty member. Sally, Sherry, Michelle, and Lorrie interacted with a program faculty member, while Cindy interacted with nursing faculty and other nursing students. Joyce interacted with former students and commented, “I had a lot of discussion with previous students who had actually taken courses there [at the university] and had some experience with online courses.” Sherry talked with her supervisor and commented, “I talked extensively with her [supervisor] about what I was doing, and the time commitment on my part…and what I expected to have in the end.” Evelyn, Shannon, Bonnie, Bill, and Kellye had little or no interaction before the first day of class. During the interview, Evelyn looked a little confused and then realized she had minimal interaction with the program director prior to the first day of class. She explained, “Not much [contact], I didn’t think I needed it, I guess. Maybe I just didn’t know enough to
know that I should have had more interaction. I think it was fine.”

Table 21 provides a summary of the interactions that occurred prior to the start of class. The summary includes who participated in the interaction, the reason for the interaction, the method of interaction, and the emergent themes.

Table 21

*Interactions Before Start of Class*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Reason for Interaction</th>
<th>Method of Interaction</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>Initial Contact</td>
<td>E-mail, Telephone</td>
<td>Interaction with Program Director/Program faculty member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program faculty</td>
<td>Initial Contact</td>
<td>E-mail, Telephone, Face-to-Face</td>
<td>Program Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>Face-to-Face</td>
<td>member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing faculty</td>
<td>Interest in Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nursing students</td>
<td>Interest in Program</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Students from Program</td>
<td>Interest in Program</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor at work</td>
<td>Online courses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interest in Program</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time commitment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme related to interactions before the start of class was *interaction with program director/program faculty member*. Interactions were limited to the initial contact and assistance in the registration process.
Engagement Practices Related to Coursework

This section of the case analysis covers the participants’ perceived engagement practices related to coursework. Coursework includes: (a) course website and tools useful in interacting with faculty and other students, (b) introductions and level of engagement, (c) favorite assignments, (d) most engaging assignments, and (e) interactions with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework phase. Secondary research questions six through ten addressed engagement practices related to coursework.

Summary Notes

The participants enjoyed talking about the coursework for the online certificate program. This was the longest part of the interview because the participants were very excited to tell their stories. This section was most enjoyable because of the energy that the participants injected when answering the questions in this section.

Secondary Research Question 6: Course Website

Participants were asked the following secondary research questions that guided the study on the course websites.

How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?
**Artifacts**

Artifacts were collected including screen shots of the websites for all four courses. The course websites were set up in a module format that was consistent across all four courses. There were minor differences between the course websites, such as background color and different icons on the front page. These differences were intentional so students taking two courses during the same semester could quickly know which course website they were accessing. All information for the courses were available on the specific course websites, including expectations and course management, course syllabi, topic/date outlines, guidelines for discussions, American Psychological Association (APA) formatting information, PowerPoint slides, assignments, discussions, quizzes, grades, e-mail, and web links. In addition, links were included for frequently asked questions, information on updating Java, and clearing Java cache.

**Interviews--How did the course websites assist you in interacting with the course content?**

Participants were complimentary of the course websites. Sally, Sherry, Lorrie, Bill, Kellye, and Susan found the information on the websites “very easy to follow,” while Shannon mentioned the websites were “very user friendly.” Sally commented, “If you just clicked on things, you could follow it real easily, and one would link to the other so it was very helpful.” Sherry, Evelyn, and Susan found all necessary resources on the course websites, while Cindy and Sherry mentioned the library was helpful for researching topics related to the program coursework. Sherry commented,
I used the online library a lot. It helped me research topics that we were
talking about and get all the information I needed for my weekly
assignments, as well as, the subjects we discussed in our discussion
groups. I found it very helpful and the instructor usually gave websites
were we could go as well in her instructions.

Sherry liked that grades were available online, and assignments were available ahead of
time to allow students some flexibility. Equally, Cindy found the websites to be difficult
and commented, “There was no actual orientation as far as the online program…. That
was learned by hands on and going in and looking. I would say that was my difficult
part.”

Table 22 provides a summary of the participants’ comments regarding the course
websites. Comments include how the course websites assisted the participant in
interacting with course content.
Table 22

Course Websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Using the website</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Use</td>
<td>Very easy to follow</td>
<td>1) User friendly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Very user friendly</td>
<td>2) Resources readily available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information availability</td>
<td>All necessary resources available</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Access to Library for Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades</td>
<td>Access to grades online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>Assignments available ahead of time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>No orientation for online programs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes for course websites include user friendly and resources were readily available. Participants commented that the websites were easy to follow with accessible content including grades, assignments, and the library.

Interviews—What tools did you use to interact with faculty and other students?

Participants mentioned eight different tools when interacting with faculty and other students. The tools consisted of the e-mail, discussion boards, course websites, telephone, library, web chat, instant messaging, and blogs. Twelve out of thirteen participants mentioned e-mail as a tool they used during the program. Sherry, Wade, Shannon, Joyce, Bonnie, Bill, and Kellye responded that discussion boards were used to interact with other students, while Sherry, Wade, Susan, Bonnie, and Kellye responded
that the course websites were tools used to interact with faculty and other students. Cindy, Evelyn, Lorrie, and Shannon mentioned they used the telephone as a tool. Shannon commented, “One telephone call in the whole program to the instructor.” Lorrie stated, “Every now and then a telephone call.” Sherry commented, “I don’t think I ever called anyone by telephone.”

Table 23 provides a summary of tools used to interact with faculty and other students. In addition, the frequency participants mentioned each tool in his/her interview was included in the table.

Table 23

*Tools Used to Interact With Faculty and Other Students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Digital Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion boards</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course website</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web chat</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instant Messaging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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The emergent theme related to tools used to interact with faculty and other students was digital communication. E-mail and discussion boards were the predominant forms of digital communication participants used to interact with faculty and other students during the program.

**Secondary Research Question 7: Introductions**

The following secondary research questions related to introductions.

How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research questions on introductions.

(a) How engaged were you in posting your introduction?

(b) What did you think the purpose was for this exercise?

**Interviews--How engaged were you in posting your introduction?**

When posting introductions, Sally, Cindy, Sherry, Wade, Shannon, Joyce, and Kellye reported that they were very engaged. Joyce commented, “Very, I was very engaged. I wanted my classmates to know me, and I want to find out who they were.” Sherry commented,

Very engaged--I guess you would say I was a little…intimidated by the fact the make up of the class was more nurses, and I was not a nurse. I was
a little leery to say exactly what my background was, but I put it out there anyways.

Bonnie and Bill were somewhat engaged and wrote up basic introductions and then copied or updated each semester. Michelle and Susan reported being a little reserved. Michelle commented,

A little reserved--Sometimes I had to be reminded to hurry up and get it posted…. After the first semester, I felt like I could trust the program faculty, and I was not holding back as much. At first, I was a little hesitant. I didn’t know what to put out there.

Bill explained how he copied his introduction from course to course only making minor changes. He thought he was being sneaky, and that he was not as engaged as he should have been. Bonnie said, “I developed a basic introduction and then updated it as I progressed through the classes.”

Evelyn said she held back on her title of chief executive officer (CEO). She commented,

I didn’t post everything about my background because I didn’t want it to be looked at as intimidating to anybody else in the course because I just felt if they knew I was in a CEO role, it would have mattered to some.

Therefore, I held that back, but since I am a nurse I fit right in.

Wade said he held back that he was on the ethics committee at work. Wade was afraid of intimidating other students and afraid the instructors would have higher expectations for his work. Both Wade and Evelyn were relieved to “come clean” during the interviews.
Table 24 provides a summary of comments on introductions and level of engagement. The level of engagement ranged from being very engaged to holding back on information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Engagement</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very engaged</td>
<td>Included information about background</td>
<td>1) Very engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimidated by the number of nurses in program</td>
<td>2) Guarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participated by posting an introduction and responded to other students’ introductions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>Developed a basic introduction and then updated each semester</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used same introduction for each course</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A little reserved</td>
<td>At first a little hesitant. Didn’t hold back as much once comfortable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held back on</td>
<td>Did not want to intimidate classmates and posted as a nurse instead of CEO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes regarding level of engagement in posting introductions were that participants were very engaged, but guarded in posting personal information. Some
participants reported being a little hesitant and reserved when writing their first introduction, but were more engaged once they felt comfortable with the program faculty and with the introduction process.

*Interviews--What did you think the purpose was for this exercise?*

All thirteen participants found the introductions to be informative and a method to start the networking process with classmates. Sally commented,

The purpose was to get to know the other people and their backgrounds.
To know where they were coming from when you were talking with them.
I would print them out and keep them so that when somebody talked, I would look back to see whom it was, and whether they were working, in school, had kids…their background.

Joyce stated,

The purpose was so we could get to know each other and form a relationship that you normally would in a regular classroom. Finding out who we are, our kids, and our lives made us real to each other, and we all had challenges we shared that got us through the coursework. The support system was incredible for an online course.

Kellye explained,

Introductions were a good tool for us all to get to know each other and not just be faceless persons with no personal information. It makes the whole
online experience a little more personable when you can read about someone’s personal life and their interests.

Table 25 provides a summary of the participants’ perceived purpose for introductions during the online courses. Further, participants’ thoughts are revealed on the usefulness of introductions at the beginning of each course.

Table 25

*Introductions: Purpose*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell classmates the student’s background</td>
<td>Online experience more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get to know classmates background</td>
<td>personable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method to start the networking process with classmates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understand one another’s viewpoints</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realize the different positions available in health care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make the online experience more personable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme regarding the purpose for introductions is that introductions made the *online experience more personable*. Participants found the introductions were useful for getting to know other students enrolled in the program. Additionally, participants could refer to the information in the introductions throughout the coursework to enhance interactions between the participants, faculty, and other students.
Secondary Research Question 8: Assignments

The following secondary research question helped to guide the study.

What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on assignments.

(a) How would you describe your favorite assignment in the program?

(b) How would you describe the assignment you felt was the most engaging in the program?

Summary Notes

The two hardest questions to answer for participants that were taking additional courses at the same time as the online certificate program or taking courses after the program were the questions on their favorite assignment and the one they found most engaging. The participants all had to take a minute to think of their answers. They were given all the time they needed. Two participants just could not answer the two questions. One participant came back later and answered the questions.

Artifacts

Assignment instructions were collected for each assignment that were mentioned during the interviews. There were eight different assignments that were collected, including three assignments from Principles of Health Care Management; one
assignment from *Legal, Ethical, and Regulatory Aspects of Health Care*; two assignments from *Financial Aspects of Health Care*; and one assignment from *Supervision and Human Resource Management*. Participants found that their favorite assignments were applicable to their careers and current events, while the most engaging assignments were applicable to their careers. These assignments were interesting, challenging, and thought provoking.

*Interviews--How would you describe your favorite assignment in the program?*

When asked about their favorite assignment, participants answered the question differently. When evaluating the reasons an assignment was chosen as a favorite, a pattern was detected. Participants’ favorite assignments were applicable at work, challenging, and related to a current topic in healthcare. Sally, Cindy, Sherry, Wade, and Bill reported the assignment chosen as their favorite was applicable at work. Sally told her story about her favorite assignment.

Doing something with goals and because of the project, I was doing at work. It helped me to focus more clearly. It was hard to see the bigger picture when you are occupied by all the details. This assignment was very applicable at work.

Sherry thought for a minute, smiled, got excited, and then told her story.

My favorite assignment--I was actually excited about this one assignment. It was the one on organizational change…. At the time, the hospital was beginning a new process for management training and so that assignment
exactly coincided with our beginnings of our organizational cultural change. Therefore, it helped me a lot since I was able to talk with people and see where we were at that time and where we could go in the future. The assignment…just overwhelmed me with excitement because I knew where we could be.

Bill was so excited to tell his story. The interview was on the telephone, but as Bill told his story, it was as if he were in the room sitting across the table. As he told the story, he had a smile on his face, and with each word, you could hear in his voice how proud he felt. He was a young man talking to his teacher and explaining that what he had learned in the classroom was now applicable to the real world. The following was captured as Bill told his story in his own words.

Cost analysis--The reason that was exciting was because about two months after I was done with the certificate program, I was promoted to director of radiology. I had to come up with cost analysis for two pieces of equipment that totaled over a half a million dollars apiece. I used the skills I learned in class and the Excel spreadsheet to figure out how long it would take to pay the scanner off, both scanners, and when the hospital would actually start seeing a return on their investment. That helped us when we presented it to the Board, to get the approval to get the piece of equipment. I was pretty excited about that assignment after the fact.
This was powerful because Bill did not appreciate this assignment while taking *Financial Aspects of Health Care* and now he remembers it as his favorite. Susan could not decide on which assignment was her favorite. She explained,

There were many favorites. One that sticks out in my mind was trying to figure out how one person can be effective wearing many hats. I do that daily—have to make sure my schedule coincides with the four clinics I travel to on a regular basis. Sometimes I am double booked and sometimes I end up at the wrong clinic.

When asked the question on his favorite assignment, Wade laughed and lightened the mood with a joke. He said, “It wasn’t anything that dealt with APA formatting.” He continued with his story.

The ethics I liked the most. It related so much to what I did at work. I was part of the ethics committee at the hospital. I have to be reminded why everyone is there, what we were supposed to be accomplishing, how we are supposed to think about the issues, and some of the trends in healthcare today. The exercises about ethics were great.”

Michelle and Evelyn enjoyed assignments that addressed current events or trends in healthcare. Michelle shifted in her seat and got somewhat excited when reminiscing about the good old days back at school.

My favorite assignment in the program probably was ethics. I can remember talking about the Teri Schiavo case, futile care, and palliative care…. It was relevant at the time…it was front-page news and the
program director told us she actually served on an ethics committee. You start thinking about all the possibilities and as a health care professional, the decisions that are made everyday, and it made it real to me. It was not an exercise in a book. It made it real…being in the headlines…all happening I think at the end of her life.

Evelyn was so excited to discuss her favorite assignment. She went on to say,

I think the research was probably my favorite because that makes you delve into what is current. We researched the Karen Quinlin information when the current case was in Florida. You know I think that showed people that things don’t change much sometimes from an ethical perspective. That big ethics question is always going to be there in health care and if that were to go away, there will always be debates with people on both sides. You know, death and dying has been a very favorite topic of mine.

Cindy and Kellye found assignments that were challenging to be their favorite. Cindy explained,

I think each assignment was a challenge. You really had to think the assignments through. I found some things fun, and those came easy to me. I am a people person and as such could relate to the principles of management in that aspect. There were others that I found more challenging; for instance, operational plans.
Kellye described her favorite assignment.

One assignment I remember…was challenging for me was ‘Being on the Fence’…. You have to know how to walk the line as a manager. You care about your employees and how they feel about a situation, but at the same time, you have to be a superior so it’s a fine line you have to walk.

Table 26 provides a summary of participants’ favorite assignment in the online program. In addition, specific reasons participants selected the assignments as their favorite were included in the table.
Table 26

*Favorite Assignments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Reason Given</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Something with Goals</td>
<td>Very applicable at work</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Plans</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>2) Current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principles of Management</td>
<td>People person</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Change</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Overwhelmed with excitement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Futile and Palliative care</td>
<td>1) Current event; headline story</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Relevant. Real life</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death and Dying</td>
<td>1) Research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Delve into current events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>1) Member of ethics committee at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Current Trends in Healthcare</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance section</td>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning for the future</td>
<td>Stop and think; Past versus Future</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Analysis</td>
<td>Project oriented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost Analysis</td>
<td>Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being on the Fence</td>
<td>Fine line to walk as manager</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing multiple hats</td>
<td>Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes related to favorite assignment were *applicable at work* and *current events*. Participants enjoyed expressing their points of view when completing assignments especially with current, controversial topics in health care.

*Interviews--How would you describe the assignment you felt was the most engaging in the program?*

When asked which assignment was the most engaging Evelyn responded, “I can say they were all engaging to me, but I guess with 35 years of nursing background that I saw the benefit of all of them…. I thought they were all worthwhile.” Cindy Michelle, Joyce, and Kellye responded that interviews with hospital employees, managers, directors, and administrators were the most engaging. Cindy described her interview saying, “I met with someone in payroll, here at the hospital. I thought that assignment was interesting…. I did like the interviews.” Michelle interviewed the CFO but was unable to recall the interview. Joyce hesitated at first and then explained,

We had to do a project that was associated with understanding the financial aspects of health care, and we actually sat down with a financial officer and interviewed him. I found out what made the hospital run. I also interviewed someone from materials management at the same time. That was cool. It was an information-gathering project. It gave us a better perspective on what makes the hospital tick.

Kellye recalled,

I think we had to interview someone above us about his/her position and
job description and find out what the individual had to do. That was interesting because I interviewed the director over about five different departments…. It was interesting to find out what was his actual job function. Also, he was interested in the program. He was asking what kind of classes I was taking, what the school was, and how the classes were. I told him it was a good program, and I was really enjoying it and learning a lot.

Sherry, Bill and Susan found assignments applicable at work were most engaging.

Sherry responded,

The assignment that was most engaging was related to the workplace. I was the supervisor or director of one hospital over one department and then I had just gotten assigned another hospital’s department on another campus. I really had to think how I would handle that situation and how could I be in two different places at one time. It really had me thinking what if I ever came upon this process in my work, how would I handle it, and what would I do? How would I feel as an employee and what would I want my employer do for me if I were at the other place and just got the news? What if I didn’t even know the person coming, how would I want him/her to interact with me, and how would I handle things?

Bill answered,

Most engaging… It had to do with FTEs (full-time equivalents)…. My department is kind of different, it’s not like a regular department-- lots of
PRN people (as needed), part-time people, full-time people, and I was having a bit of trouble with that assignment…. I talked with a hospital accountant.

Susan recalled,

There was a finance assignment where we had to persuade someone to purchase a piece of equipment. I opted for an MRI (Magnet Resonance Imaging) machine because we refer out approximately 300 patients per month for this procedure. This would be a beneficial piece of equipment for my company to have onsite at the orthopedic office. It would be cost effective for us.

Table 27 provides a summary of the assignments participants found most engaging in the program. Additionally, the table includes participants’ reasons for choosing the assignment as most engaging.
### Table 27

**Most Engaging Assignments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assignments</th>
<th>Reason Given</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All assignment were engaging</td>
<td>Beneficial given nursing background</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview with CFO</td>
<td>No reason given</td>
<td>2) Interesting,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview with person in payroll</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>challenging, and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview with Financial person and Interview with Materials Management person</td>
<td>1) Perspective on how hospital ticks thought provoking</td>
<td>thought provoking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview with Director</td>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>2) Information gathering project</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persuading someone to purchase a piece of equipment</td>
<td>Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing: The Manager’s Responsibility</td>
<td>1) Applied to department staffing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Split department manager</td>
<td>2) Talked with hospital accountant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Challenging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Thought provoking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right to Life</td>
<td>1) Engendered more discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Topics that were controversial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health care law</td>
<td>No reason given</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes for the most engaging assignments were\textit{applicable to work} and\textit{interesting, challenging, and thought provoking}. The assignments mentioned most often by the participants as engaging were the assignments that required the participants to interview different members of the management team at a health care facility. Interviews were required in all of the courses in the program.

\textit{Secondary Research Question 9: Discussions}

The following secondary research question helped to guide the study.

How engaged were participants during the course discussions, and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

The participants were asked two questions related to the secondary research question on course discussions.

(a) How engaged were you during the course discussions as a participant? As a discussion coordinator?

(b) What were your perceptions of the course discussions from the first discussion to the last?

\textit{Summary Notes}

Discussions were at the center of each course in the online certificate program. Participants were required to post at least four times per week to receive the full number of points for the discussions in each course. In addition, each participant was discussion coordinator at least once in each of the four courses in the program. Participants were
excited when talking about the discussions. One participant commented that she still was passionate about her position on the Teri Schiavo case.

Artifacts

One artifact was collected related to discussions. The *Guidelines for Discussion* document explained how discussions should be conducted, including when discussions start and end, how to respond to other students without offending anyone, the role of the discussion coordinator, and how discussions are graded.

Interviews—How engaged were you during the course discussions as a participant?

Participants in the study reported that they were very engaged from the perspective of a discussion participant. Cindy commented,

Very engaged. I enjoyed discussions. I made my own personal viewpoint known, and I researched for outside information, from the internet, to add to the discussion. I learned from others all the time.

Sherry responded,

I believe I was 100% engaged. I always discussed pretty much everyday. I may have been out of town a couple of days, but I was always interacting in the discussions. In fact, there were a couple of times there were heated discussions going on that I got involved in (Teri Schiavo case), and I stuck with my guns on my opinion.
Sally, Cindy, Michelle, Evelyn, Kellye, Susan, and Shannon responded that they liked the discussions. Participants enjoyed participating in a good debate, playing devil’s advocate, discussing topics pertaining to current job, and providing their personal viewpoints. Michelle enjoyed “a good debate,” while Evelyn liked “playing the devil’s advocate.” Evelyn explained, “I would just throw something out and see how everyone responded. I’m just looking for input to the discussion. Make sure we don’t leave any stones unturned.”

Susan had mixed feelings about the discussions. Susan felt a good discussion was one in which participants could relate to their jobs. Kellye described discussions as “interesting and fun.” Kellye said, “I enjoyed the discussions, especially since I have an interest in…interaction with people…that was always interesting and fun for me to be able to discuss things with the class.”

Sally stressed during her interview that she liked discussions. Earlier in the interview, she commented that she even logged on during lunchtime to post to the discussions. In response to the question on how engaged was she in course discussions, Sally responded,

I liked discussions. I would logon to see if anyone posted, and see if there was anything I could reply to, or if I could try to ask a question that would get other students to think. I like to encourage more of a discussion, because I like doing stuff like that. I liked discussing.

In contrast to enjoying the discussions, Joyce, Bonnie, and Evelyn felt the discussions tended to get off topic. Joyce responded, “If we could stay on track with the
discussion, it was good. There was a tendency to get off topic.” Bonnie commented, “Sometimes the discussions would be off-base. What I mean is they were relevant to the topics, but classmates got off target.” Evelyn responded, “Sometimes I felt the discussions really weren’t going anywhere.” In addition to discussions getting off topic, Bill responded, “The only problem I had with the discussions was I thought it was time consuming for me…. I guess they were a necessity, but I would have liked fewer discussions.” Susan expressed that discussions were “at times frustrating because she didn’t feel everyone was doing his/her part.”

Table 28 provides a summary of findings related to engagement experiences during the course discussions. Participants’ comments were mixed when engaging in course discussions.
Table 28

*Perceptions of Course Discussions as Participant*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practice</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Discussions</td>
<td>Very engaged</td>
<td>1) Very engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100% engaged</td>
<td>2) Enjoyed a thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asked questions that provoked deeper thinking</td>
<td>provoking debate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Made own personal viewpoint known</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researched for information on internet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussed almost everyday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More postings than required</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoyed discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoyed a good debate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoyed discussions related to current job</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Played “devil’s advocate”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tendency to get off topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time consuming; Preferred less discussions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At times, some students were not participating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes for course discussions were very engaged, thought provoking debates, and time consuming. Participants enjoyed discussing topics related to their current jobs and playing the “devil’s advocate” and asking questions that “provoked deeper thinking.”

Interviews--How engaged were you during the course discussions as a discussion coordinator?

Participants reported that they were engaged as the discussion coordinator, but there were mixed feelings as to whether participants enjoyed or were intimidated by being the coordinator. Shannon commented,

“Engaged--I tried to engage people who didn’t sign on as often…it’s interesting to get everyone’s perspective and try to summarize all the postings.”

Joyce responded with the following comment.

Very much so [engaged]. Even though the requirement wasn’t that you had to be on the discussion board everyday or all the time, I pretty much was to keep focused. What I tried to do is stimulate thought processes for everybody else so they could get their posts in and keep them directed.

Lorrie shared her thoughts.

I was pretty engaged because I wanted to do a good job. I wanted a good outcome for that week. I made sure everyone was posting, and I made sure it was pertinent I would ask them questions about their postings to keep
Kellye described her experience.

Yeah, I was pretty engaged. That was one thing I didn’t miss because you had to read everybody’s posts, you had to keep up with what everybody said, and what everybody responded to each other. It was interesting, fun, and challenging, but I’m glad we don’t have to do that anymore.

Additionally, Sherry discussed being intimidated as discussion coordinator.

I was a little intimidated by being the discussion coordinator because I am not good at striking up conversations, but from what I remember about what I did, the topic I had was a little easier. I’m glad I got the topic I did because I was a little more comfortable with the topic I had…. Had it been another topic, I probably wouldn’t have been able to discuss it as well. However, with me not being a nurse and having to start a conversation with other nurses, it was a little intimidating. But I got through it.”

Bonnie and Cindy mentioned that being the discussion coordinator was engaging and time consuming. Bonnie commented,

“I often found it hard to be the coordinator.... [and] keep up daily when working full-time and carrying on my personal duties, while being so engaged with classes. I managed, but I often felt out of place doing it.”

Cindy stated,

“It required more participation, and more true focus on everyone’s comments. You had to keep the discussion going by examining all angles
of the topic with the group.”

Participants took the role of discussion coordinator seriously and applied their own styles to engaging the other students in a meaningful discussion. Joyce commented,

“If the coordinator was good, everybody stayed focused on the topic and you were actually able to learn information that would support the assignment for the week.”

Shannon commented,

“For the most part I think that the group…gave really good feedback, different perspectives, cited articles, and gave links to resources to support their point of view.”

Table 29 provides a summary of descriptions related to engagement experiences while in the role of discussion coordinator. The descriptions included the participants’ thoughts as the discussion coordinator.
Table 29

*Perceptions of Course Discussions as Discussion Coordinator*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Coordinator</td>
<td>Very engaged</td>
<td>1) Very engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sometimes too engaged</td>
<td>2) Time consuming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helped to build leadership skills</td>
<td>3) Difficult facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Liked taking turns as coordinator</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor assisted with ideas for discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Asked more questions to keep discussions going</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Examined all angles of a topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Good coordinator kept class on topic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feast or famine; the less a coordinator says the better the discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Interesting, fun, and challenging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A little intimidating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Felt out of place</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not good at striking up conversation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Time consuming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Too much reading</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Required more participation and focus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes for discussion coordinators were that leading the discussions were very engaging, time consuming, and difficult facilitating. Participants found that it was difficult to keep the discussion progressing and on topic.

*Interviews--What were your perceptions of the course discussions from the first discussion to the last?*

At the beginning of the program, participants described their experiences with discussions as intimidating, uncomfortable, and hard to know what to post. In addition, participants’ responses to discussion postings were shallow and seemed to lack direction. Sherry commented,

My first discussion-- my perception was these nurses are going to gang up on me. Almost all of them were nurses like I said, and I was intimidated because I didn’t know. I really wasn’t sure how I could involve myself and be on the same level without being a nurse myself and converse with them on a plain level.

Sally responded, “It would start out where people weren’t sure what to say and they tried to agree with each other to getting deeper or more involved.” Cindy responded,

We did many ethical discussions. I guess at first, the conversations felt uncomfortable because we had differences of opinion. Once we got into it, we became more comfortable with sharing our thoughts. We were able to explain why we felt the way we did, and the group accepted that.
After the first couple of discussions, participants described their experiences changed as they became more comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions. In addition, students became more involved and more focused on the discussions. In the end, students learned how to communicate their feelings, opinions, and different points of views without being judgmental or offending to other students. Sherry commented,

By the end of the whole program,…I got to know each student and I conversed with them at ease. I didn’t have any problems I felt like I could pretty much bring up anything; any opinion of mine that I felt I needed to without repercussions.

Michelle responded,

I think more people probably got involved. I think we just had learned more and applied more. I enjoyed the conversations all along. I think you could see people growing through the semester and they were applying what they learned.

Shannon explained,

“Each course built on participation and as we went through the courses with the different people being coordinators and with the instructors’ leadership, the engagement was there. It got more focused on the task at hand, and you know--less sort of chit chatting--More functional communication.”

Additionally, Michelle explained what she learned during the discussions.
I learned…not to be judgmental. I found myself doing that sometimes because I didn’t agree with their answers or they wouldn’t answer the question the way I thought they should and I had to find myself, pull back, and not be so quite judgmental.

Table 30 provides a summary of descriptions related to the participants’ perceptions of discussions at the beginning of the program. At the beginning of the program, participants unfamiliar with the discussion format had a hard time posting and sharing their ideas.

Table 30

*Discussions--Perceptions Regarding Beginning of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories at beginning of program</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions at first</td>
<td>At first, students were not sure what to say</td>
<td>Uncomfortable and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agreed with each other; shallow responses</td>
<td>intimidating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversation felt uncomfortable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Had differences of opinion; hard to share</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intimidated because of the unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discussions seemed not to go anywhere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes for discussions at the beginning of the program were that participants found discussions to be *uncomfortable and intimidating*. Participants were uncomfortable because the discussion postings were shallow and seemed to go nowhere.
Additionally, participants were intimidated because of the unknown and not sure how to communicate their opinions.

Table 31 provides a summary of descriptions related to the participants’ perceptions of discussions at the end of the program. At the end of the program, participants were more involved in discussions.

Table 31

*Discussions--Perceptions Regarding End of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions at end of program</td>
<td>Became more comfortable sharing thoughts</td>
<td>1) Comfortable and engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heated discussions but held to opinion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Different opinions accepted by group</td>
<td>2) Applied knowledge from program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Got to know each student</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More students got involved</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Students became more knowledgeable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Applying what was learned from program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More focused on task at hand</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More functional communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Saw other points of view on situations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learned not to be judgmental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes for discussions at the end of the program were that participants felt *comfortable and engaged* and *applied knowledge from program*. At the end of the program, participants more focused on the discussion topics, and opinions were based on knowledge gained from the program coursework.

*Secondary Research Question 10: Coursework*

The following secondary research question helped to guide the study.

What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

The participants were asked one question related to the secondary research question on interactions during coursework.

(a) What interactions did you have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

*Interviews--What interactions did you have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?*

Participants were very engaged during the coursework starting with student-content interactions with the course websites, continuing with student-student interactions during introductions, followed by student-student, student-instructor (i.e., program faculty), and student-community interactions (i.e., health care professionals) during assignments and discussions. As mentioned previously, participants were very engaged in posting introductions, posting discussions, and completing assignments. In addition, two
participants mentioned that they enjoyed getting together for lunch with other students working at the same hospital. Joyce commented,

   We had lunch together…the ones that were here and we would talk about the discussions. Another student and I took courses at the same time. If we didn’t have lunch together we were e-mailing each other or talking on the telephone.

Michelle explained, “We met for lunch a couple of times. We made telephone calls, e-mails, and made some friends.”

   The program faculty member was contacted when students had problems or questions. In addition, the program’s faculty member helped the discussion coordinators by giving support through e-mail on how to keep the discussions active. Cindy commented,

   Most everything was online. I called my [program faculty member] several times with questions or problems. I remember once having trouble uploading an assignment, and once with formatting. My interactions with my [program faculty members] were very positive.

The students seemed excited that they were given the opportunity to talk with administrators at work. Sally commented,

   I had to talk with my administrator a couple of times to get answers to assignments. I had to get budget numbers at one point for one assignment to try to make it realistic for me. If I was going to do the assignment, I wanted to use numbers that worked for me. Actually, I came up with one
project at one point for one of the assignments that I would still like to do.

It was getting my own PTINR (Prothrombin Time/International Normalized Ratio tester) so you can stick people and save money instead of using the lab for my weekly draws. I haven’t been able to do that. The assignment was to figure when was the break-even point and when do you start making money. I want to do that instead of paying the lab.

Wade commented,

Well for some of our assignments, we had to use some realistic scenarios. So I remember going and talking with our controller one time about one of our health care financing projects. I don’t remember all the details, but I had to go and get some real life questions and answers.

Table 32 provides a summary of engagement with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community during coursework. Participants were fully engaged during coursework.
Table 32

**Interactions Related to Coursework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Types of Interaction</th>
<th>Method of Engagement</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program faculty</td>
<td>Questions or problems</td>
<td>E-mail, telephone call, discussions</td>
<td>Very engaged with faculty, other students, and members of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>Discussion topics Help with assignments Met for lunch</td>
<td>Discussions, chat room, e-mail, telephone calls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members of the community</td>
<td>Interviews Help with assignments</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme for interactions related to coursework was that participants were *very engaged with faculty, other students, and members of the community*. During coursework, participants were immersed in engagement practices (discussions, assignments, interviews) with program faculty, other students, and members of the community.

**Program Completion**

This section of the case analysis presents the narrative findings related to program completion and success. Program Completion included (a) how participants celebrated success, (b) what the participants experience at graduation time, and (c) what interactions
the participants engaged in when celebrating success. Secondary research questions 11 through 13 addressed engagement practices at the point of program completion.

**Secondary Research Question 11: Celebrate Success**

The following secondary research question helped guide the study.

How did the participants celebrate success?

The participants were asked one question related to the secondary research question on celebrating success.

(a) How did you celebrate success?

**Artifacts**

Artifacts collected included a newspaper article and announcements in newsletters from workplaces of the participants. The newspaper article announced the first graduating class of the online certificate program. Three women comprised the first graduating class. In addition, a newsletter from a local hospital announced that two employees were among the first graduates of the online certificate program.

**Interviews—How did you celebrate success?**

The participants completing the online certificate program were acknowledged in the last discussion in their final course. Classmates wrote notes congratulating the participants for completing the certificate program, while program faculty members wrote personalized e-mails. Sally commented, “There was an e-mail from the professors
that said good job everybody. In the last discussion, people said congratulations to the ones that were finishing the program.” Further, Kellye commented, “The last class everybody posted congratulations to you, both teachers and students. It was really nice to read all of the comments and to see how excited everyone was for us.” Joyce was in the bachelor’s of science in nursing program commented, “I did get a couple of e-mails and notes congratulating me and a call from one or two of my advisors telling me congratulations and encouraging me to continue with my degree.”

The participants celebrated completion of the certificate program with their families. Sherry, Bonnie, and Shannon celebrated with their families at dinner at a local restaurant. Sherry commented, “We just had a family celebration at a local restaurant.” Sherry, Bonnie, and Cindy celebrated by spending time with their families. Cindy commented, “I celebrated by relaxing and just having some family time.” Four participants mentioned celebrating with their husbands. Sally commented that the extent of her celebration was her husband saying, “Good job Honey.” Bill commented, “My wife and I went to the mountains for the weekend.”

Participants celebrated completing the online certificate program with co-workers and managers. Three participants received promotions after completing the program. Shannon was promoted to assistant vice president of nursing, Bill was promoted to director of radiology, and Michelle was promoted to lab supervisor. Cindy changed her career focus and commented, “The BSN and the certificate program both helped me to obtain my current position.” Sally, Michelle, Shannon, and Joyce were recognized with announcements in the hospital’s newsletter, while Sherry, Evelyn, and Wade mentioned
they were congratulated at work. Shannon and Joyce celebrated by going out to dinner together. Joyce went to lunch with co-workers, while Evelyn celebrated by showing her certificate to her team. Sherry commented, “My employer congratulated me with something special.” Michelle was a little disappointed. Completing the certificate meant so much to her, but at work, it seemed uneventful.

Table 33 provides a summary of comments on how participants celebrated success. Participants celebrated success at the university, at home, and in the workplace.
The emergent themes related to celebrate success were *congratulatory communication*, *family celebration*, and *congratulatory celebration*. The program faculty, advisor, students, and other graduates from the university congratulated participants. At home, the
participants celebrated with their spouses and/or had some family time. Participants recalled that the real congratulatory celebrations were at work. There were promotions, announcements in the monthly or quarterly newspapers, lunches, dinners, and one participant got something special from her boss.

Secondary Research Question 12: Graduation

The following secondary research question help guide the study.

What did the participants experience at graduation time?

The participants were asked one question related to the secondary research question on graduation.

(a) What did you experience at graduation time?

Artifacts

Artifacts collected associated with graduation included a copy of the program’s completion certificate. The program’s completion certificate reviewed was 8 ½ inches by 11 inches in size and was suitable for framing. The certificate was similar in look to an undergraduate degree including the university’s raised seal and signatures of the president, vice president of academic affairs, dean, and program director.

Interviews--What did you experience at graduation time?

At the end of the semester, those completing the certificate program became graduates of the program. According to university policy, graduates of the online
certificate program do not participate in the graduation ceremony unless the graduate is receiving a bachelor’s degree. The graduates for the online certificate program were sent their certificates through the mail with one exception. The first students to complete the certificate program were invited to dinner and were presented their certificates in person. Michelle commented, “Actually it was very nice because the program director took us out to dinner.”

Sally, Wade, Shannon, and Joyce mentioned that they did not participate in the ceremony. Additionally, Cindy and Bonnie did participate since they were graduating with both the certificate program and the BSN program. Cindy, a BSN graduate commented, “There were five (2 graduates and 3 completed individual courses) of us from the online certificate program at graduation for BSNs. It was nice to put a face with a name.” Bonnie commented, “Felt out of place. Not many people in the program participated in the ceremony. I did because it was a goal for me to complete my BSN.”

Graduates of the online certificate program had mixed emotions when completing the program. The participants were proud of their accomplishments, and at the same time glad to have completed the program. Michelle commented,

I was proud. I was as proud of earning the certificate, as I was when I got my college degree. I was a whole lot younger when I got that degree. The certificate program was hard work. It was hard for me.

Kellye commented, “I am pretty proud of my certificate. It was a challenging program…. I learned a lot and I’m pretty proud I was able to complete it.” Lorrie commented, “Yeah, I was glad to be finished. I was proud of my achievement.” Participants described feeling
excited, happy, fabulous, successful, while other participants felt relieved, thankful it was over, glad to be through, relaxed, and some were ready for a “breather break.” Cindy, Evelyn, Wade, Bill, and Susan mentioned that their certificates were hanging on their walls at work, while Sally and Kellye had their certificates hanging on their walls at home.

Table 34 provides a summary of comments on graduation and emotions related to program completion. Participants found they had mixed emotions upon completing the certificate program.
Table 34

*Graduation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceremony</td>
<td>Did not participate in graduation ceremony</td>
<td>Proud of Accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Participated in graduation for BSN</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions Related to Program</td>
<td>Relief, relaxation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion</td>
<td>Breather break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotion of knowing it is over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thankful it was over</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Proud; Excited; Happy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sense of accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td>On wall at office or home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fabulous, Successful</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme for graduation was *proud of accomplishment*. The participants were emotional when discussing their experiences at graduation time. The participants were genuinely proud of what they had accomplished.

*Secondary Research Question 13: Program Completion*

The following secondary research question helped guide the study.
What interactions did you have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community when celebrating your success?

The participants were asked one question related to the secondary research question on celebrating success.

(a) What interactions did you have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community when celebrating your success?

*Interviews--What interactions did you have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community when celebrating your success?*

As participants finished the final course, interactions were mainly with the program faculty, advisors, and other students. Once they became graduates of the program, interactions transitioned to the graduates’ workplace and families. In addition, the interaction methods transitioned from e-mail and telephone to face-to-face and internal news media.

Table 35 provides a summary of interactions with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community at program completion. Participants celebrated graduation in their own way at the university, home, and in the workplace.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Method of Interactions</th>
<th>Emergent theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program faculty</td>
<td>Sent congratulatory e-mail</td>
<td>E-mail</td>
<td>1) Transitioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sent certificate to graduate</td>
<td>United States Mail</td>
<td>from university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Newspaper articles</td>
<td>News Media</td>
<td>celebrations to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Posted notes congratulating the students that were completing the program</td>
<td>Discussion Board</td>
<td>work and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>celebrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisors</td>
<td>Called to congratulate BSN students that completed the certificate program</td>
<td>Telephone call</td>
<td>2) Transitioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>from electronic communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-workers</td>
<td>Showed certificate to team</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>to face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Celebrated at Dinner</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td>and print media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer</td>
<td>Congratulated at work</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Announcements in newsletters</td>
<td>Internal News Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>Proud of graduate’s accomplishment</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>Celebrated with family</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes for interactions at program completion were transitioning from university celebrations to work and family celebrations and transitioning from digital communications to face-to-face and print media. At program completion, most interactions occurred in the workplace and at home with the participants’ family.

Chapter Summary

Summary of Participants’ Demographics

The participants were predominately female, non-traditional, computer competent, in-state students with career, family, and community responsibilities. The participants’ educational objectives were to earn the certificate and build an educational foundation. The major career objectives included career advancement and the ability to apply new knowledge to the workplace.

Table 36 includes a summary of the participants’ demographics. The emergent themes are included for each demographic.
Table 36

*Summary of Findings and Emergent Themes Related to Demographics of Participants at Start of Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Summary of Findings</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>11 female; 2 male</td>
<td>A female population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>27 – 53 years old</td>
<td>Non-traditional students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Lived in Midlands or Upstate South Carolina</td>
<td>In-state students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worked on course at home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Worked Full-time in Health Care</td>
<td>Career, family, and community responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family at home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Active in community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other educational commitments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>Varied from Basic to Advanced</td>
<td>Computer Competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competency</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Objectives</td>
<td>Complete certificate program</td>
<td>1) Earn certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Work toward a bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>2) Build an educational foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gain knowledge on topics taught</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Objectives</td>
<td>Career advancement</td>
<td>1) Career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Apply knowledge gained from program in workplace</td>
<td>2) Application of new knowledge to workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

149
The majority of participants reported *earning a certificate* and *career advancement* as their primary objectives for pursuing the online certificate program. At the beginning of the program, participants felt that the knowledge that they would gain from the program would assist in advancing their careers.

**Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Recruitment**

Local, low cost marketing methods were employed to disseminate information about the online certificate program. Participants predominantly learned about the program by word of mouth. Participants were attracted to the program because of the convenience of the online offering and a desire to study emergent topics in health care.

The majority of participants contacted the program director and expressed an interest in registering for the program. Prior to registering, participants learned about the program and went through an assessment process to determine their ‘fit’ for an online program. Participants found the program director was helpful, informative, and created a friendly atmosphere during their initial contacts. After conversing with the program director, participants registered for courses in the program. Participants were pleasantly surprised how quick and easy it was to complete the online registration process.

Upon logging onto the course websites, participants were quick at reading the syllabi and topic/date outlines. The syllabi and topic/date outlines assisted participants with time management, and if desired, allowed the participants to meet expectations ahead of time.
Table 37 includes a summary of engagement practices and emergent themes related to recruitment. All of the elements related to recruitment are included.

**Table 37**

*Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Recruitment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Overall Theme for Recruitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>1) Word of Mouth</td>
<td>Managing the Process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Local, low cost</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Targeted health care professionals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and nursing students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attracted to Program</td>
<td>1) Convenience of online offering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Emergent topics in health care</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Contact</td>
<td>Contacted program director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content of Initial Contact</td>
<td>1) Expressed an interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Informative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Assessed ‘fit’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tone of Initial Contact</td>
<td>Helpful, friendly atmosphere</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>1) Quick, easy, and online</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Faculty helpful and responsive to participants’ needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The overall theme for recruitment was *managing the process*. Participants had limited interactions with the program director and program’s faculty members during the recruitment phase and were responsible for managing the process. Participants made the initial contacts and expressed interest, while the program director explained the expectations for the online program, and explained how to register. Participants were responsible for registering, reading the syllabi and topic/date outlines, and managing their time.

*Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Coursework*

Participants interacted with the course websites throughout the online certificate program. Each course website in the program was similar. Participants described the course websites as user friendly with resources readily available. Email was the primary communications tool used in the program.
Introductions assisted the participants in meeting other students online. Participants commented that introductions made the online experience more personable and there was a high level of engagement.

Participants’ favorite assignments were those applicable at work and were based on current events. Participants also mentioned that their most engaging assignments were applicable at work and the assignments were interesting, challenging, and thought provoking.

Discussions at the beginning of the program were uncomfortable and intimidating. At the end of the program, participants commented that they were comfortable and engaged. In addition, several participants commented that after the first couple of discussions, opinions went from thoughts to actual knowledge gained from the program.

Table 38 includes a summary of engagement practices and emergent themes related to coursework. All of the areas under coursework are included in the display.
### Table 38

**Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Coursework**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Overall Theme for Coursework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Website</td>
<td>1) User friendly</td>
<td>Unique Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Resources readily available</td>
<td>Focusing on Career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Digital communications</td>
<td>Aspirations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>1) Very engaged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Guarded</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Online experience more personable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Assignment</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Current events</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging Assignments</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Interesting, challenging, and thought provoking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>1) Very engaged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Enjoyed a thought provoking debate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Time consuming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Coordinator</td>
<td>1) Very engaging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Time consuming</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Difficult facilitating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 38 (continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Overall Theme for Coursework</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>Uncomfortable and intimidating</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginning of Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions</td>
<td>1) Comfortable and engaged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of Program</td>
<td>2) Applied knowledge from program</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Very engaged with faculty, other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students, and members of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall emergent theme for coursework was each participant had a *unique experience focusing on career aspirations*. Participants were very engaged with faculty, other students, and members of the community during the coursework phase. Each participant had his/her own unique experience when working through assignments and discussions. While participants all had the same assignments, they interacted with the assignments differently.

*Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Program Completion*

At program completion, participants celebrated successfully completing the certificate program. Celebrations took place at the university, at home, and with the
participants’ families. At graduation time, participants received their certificates in the mail and reported that they were proud of their accomplishments.

Table 39 includes a summary of emergent themes related to program completion. The components include graduation and celebrations.

Table 39

Summary of Engagement Practices and Emergent Themes Related to Program Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
<th>Overall Theme for Program Completion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate Success</td>
<td>Congratulatory Communication</td>
<td>Celebration of Accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Celebration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Congratulatory Celebration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation</td>
<td>Proud of accomplishment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td>Transitioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall theme for program completion was *celebration of accomplishment*. At program completion, emergent themes focused on celebrations and participants were proud of their accomplishments. Additionally, interactions transitioned from program faculty and students to co-workers and families and from digital communication to face-to-face and internal news media.
The purpose of the chapter is to summarize the study including a discussion of the major findings and recommendations. The study was a qualitative, descriptive case study, which explored the graduates’ perceived experiences with engagement practices related to recruitment, coursework, and course completion in an online certificate program. The data sources for the study consisted of face-to-face, telephone, and e-mail interviews, summary notes, and a collection of artifacts. All data were stored in a database using the NVivo 8 software and was then coded into 20 tree nodes, 39 sub-nodes, 9 free nodes, and 461 entries. Further, the data were analyzed and 50 emergent themes and 3 overall themes were identified.

The following primary and secondary research questions guided the study. The primary overarching question that guided the study was as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices?

Further, the following secondary questions were developed to guide the research study:

*Recruitment*

1. What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?
2. What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?

3. What did the participants experience when registering for courses?

4. What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?

5. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Coursework

6. How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?

7. How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

8. What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

9. How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

10. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

Program Completion

11. How did the participants celebrate success?

12. What did the participants experience at graduation time?
13. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community to celebrate success?

Chapter One provided an overview of the study, the statement of the problem, and the purpose of the study. The primary research question, 13 secondary research questions, the theoretical framework, and the conceptual framework were used to guide the study.

The theoretical framework for the study was based on three components (recruiting, coursework, post coursework) from Angelino and Natvig’s (2007, 2009) Model for Engagement. In addition, Rovai’s (2003) Composite Persistent Model, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Student Attrition Model and Tinto’s (1975, 1993) Student Integration Model supported the theoretical foundation for the study. The conceptual framework of the study included the participants (graduates of the online program), engagement practices (recruitment and coursework), and activities related to program completion (celebration of success and graduation).

A review of the literature in relation to student retention and student engagement in an online learning environment was presented in Chapter Two. The literature review consisted of the growth in online learning, characteristics of online learners, retention of online learners, retention theories and models, and strategies for improving student engagement and retention in online learning environments.

The details for the design of the research study were described in Chapter Three. The details included the research design, research questions, a description of the single case study, a description of the selection of the participants, role of the researcher, data
collection, methods of interviewing, data analysis, validation of findings, and ethical considerations.

The findings from the single case study were presented in Chapter Four. The secondary research questions, the theoretical framework, and the conceptual framework guided the analysis for the findings. Findings included student demographics, engagement practices related to recruitment, engagement practices related to coursework, and program completion.

Chapter Five contains a summary of the study, including an overall summary of major findings and emergent themes for each secondary research question that was used to guide the study. Further, a discussion on the major findings as they related to the literature and theoretical framework, general recommendations for higher education, and recommendations for future research are presented in the chapter.

Overall Summary of Major Findings and Emergent Themes

The purpose of this section is to present a narrative summary of the major findings and emergent themes of the participants’ demographics and the 13 secondary questions used to guide the study are presented. As mentioned earlier, the research questions were based on the conceptual framework and theoretical framework, which helped to explain engagement practices during recruitment and coursework of the participants who were successful in an online certificate program.
**Overall Summary of Emergent Themes Related to Participants’ Demographics**

The participants’ demographics were used to describe the participants at the time they started the online certificate program. The demographic variables were gender, age, location, responsibility, computer competency, educational objectives, and career objectives. Table 40 includes an overall summary of the emergent themes associated with the participants’ demographic variables at the start of the program.

Table 40  

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Participants’ Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Components</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>A female population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Non-traditional students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>In-state students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Career, family, and community responsibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Competency</td>
<td>Computer Competent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Objectives</td>
<td>1) Earn certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Build an educational foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career Objectives</td>
<td>1) Career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Application of new knowledge to workplace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes of the demographic variables described the participants at the start of the program. Participants consisted of a *female population of non-traditional, in-state,*
computer competent with career, family, and community responsibilities. The participants’ educational objectives were to earn the certificate and build an educational foundation that would assist them in achieving their career objectives of career advancement and an application of new knowledge to the workplace.

**Overall Summary of Findings and Emergent Themes: Recruitment**

The four engagement practices related to recruitment were (a) marketing, (b) initial contact, (c) registration, and (d) course information. The narrative summary on recruitment addresses secondary research questions one through five.

**Secondary Research Question 1: Marketing**

What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?

Low cost marketing methods targeting local health care professionals and nursing entities attracted the participants who were searching for the convenience of an online program focusing on emergent topics in health care. Table 41 includes a summary of emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to marketing.
Table 41

Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Marketing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Marketing Methods</td>
<td>1) Word of Mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Local, low cost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) Targeted health care professionals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and nursing students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attractiveness of</td>
<td></td>
<td>1) Convenience of online offering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program</td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Emergent topics in health care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes related to marketing included *word of mouth* and *local, low cost* marketing methods. Examples of marketing methods for the online certificate program included letters, brochures, e-mail notification, program websites, local newspapers, and presentations at local hospitals. Word of mouth was the most prevalent marketing method discussed by the participants. Marketing methods *targeted health care professionals* working in hospitals and nursing homes, as well as, *nursing students*.

The emergent themes related to attractiveness of program were *convenience of online offering* and *emergent topics in health care*. Participants were attracted to the online certificate program because it was available online, with no face-to-face or synchronous course meetings. In addition, the participants all indicated they could work from home, make their own schedules, and learn about emergent topics in health care.
Secondary Research Question 2: Initial Contact

The following research question guided the inquiry related to initial contact with faculty.

What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for a course?

Participants interested in the online certificate program contacted either the program director or a program faculty member. The initial contact focused on describing the program, assessing the participants ‘fit’ for the program, and explaining how to register for courses. Participants reported that both the program director and program faculty members were helpful and friendly. Table 42 includes an overall summary of emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to initial contact.

Table 42

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Initial Contact*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Contact</td>
<td>Method of initial contact</td>
<td>Contacted program director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context of Initial Contact</td>
<td>1) Expressed an interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Informative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tone of Initial Contact</td>
<td>Helpful, friendly atmosphere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The emergent themes related to the participants’ initial contact were that the participant contacted the program director either by telephone or face-to-face. During these conversations, the participant expressed an interest in pursuing the certificate program. When explaining the program to the participants, the program director was informative and provided an assessment to determine, the participants’ ‘fit’ for the program. Overall, the participants felt the program director fostered a helpful, friendly atmosphere.

Secondary Research Question 3: Registration

The following research question guided the inquiry related to registration.

What did the participants experience when registering for courses?

Participants agreed that registration was a quick and easy process. The majority of participants completed registration online and never had to come on campus. Table 43 includes an overall summary of emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to registration.
Table 43

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Registration*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>Experienced at Registration Time</td>
<td>1) Quick, easy, and online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Faculty helpful and responsive to participants’ needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes related to registration were that the process was *quick, easy, and online*, and if assistance were needed, *faculty was helpful and responsive to the participants’ needs*. Participants seemed pleasingly surprised that registration was so quick and easy. One participant commented that she never came to campus and was glad the registration process was online. Furthermore, if coming to campus had been a requirement, then she would not have chosen to register for this particular online certificate program.

*Secondary Research Question 4: Course Information*

The following research question guided the inquiry related to course information.

What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of class?

Participants found the syllabi and topic/date outlines to be the most important information before start of each course. The syllabi and topic/date outlines were used by
participants to understand expectations for the course, due dates for coursework, to purchase the textbook needed for the course, and to obtain contact information for the faculty member teaching the course. Table 44 includes an overall summary of emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to course information.

Table 44

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Course Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Information</td>
<td>Most Important Information</td>
<td>1) Syllabi and topic/date outlines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perceived importance</td>
<td>2) Time Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3) Meet expectations ahead of schedule</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes related to course information included *syllabi and topic/date outlines, time management,* and *meet expectations ahead of schedule.* The most important information included the syllabi and topic/date outlines. Information on the course syllabi was used to purchase books, develop a schedule for course due dates, and meet expectations ahead of schedule.

Research Question 5: Interactions During Recruitment

The following research question guided the inquiry related to interactions during recruitment.
What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Participants interacted with the program director and/or program’s faculty member during the recruitment phase. However, interactions between the participants, other students, members of the community were limited prior to the first day of the first course. Table 45 includes an overall summary of the types of interaction and the emergent themes associated with interactions related to recruitment.

Table 45

*Overall Summary: Interactions Related to Recruitment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Types of Interaction</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Interactions with Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other students</td>
<td>Director / Program Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members of the community</td>
<td>Member</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme for interactions related to recruitment was that *interactions were with the program director and/or program faculty member*. For the majority of the participants, the initial contacts, which they initiated, were the only interactions that occurred before the first day of class. While participants acknowledged that they accessed the websites prior to the first day of classes, none of the participants mentioned accessing the websites as a type of interaction.
**Overall Summary of Findings and Emergent Themes: Coursework**

The three engagement practices related to coursework were (a) course website, (b) introductions, and (c) assignments. The narrative summary on coursework addressed secondary research questions six through ten.

**Secondary Research Question 6: Course Websites**

The overall summary of findings related to coursework addressed the following secondary research questions.

How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?

Participants found the course websites easy to follow and found all resources were available in one place. Content that participants found readily available were the library, grades, and assignments. Participants mentioned eight different digital based communications tools they found useful when using the course websites. These communication tools included e-mail, discussion boards, course websites, telephone, library, web char, instant messaging, and blogs. E-mail was the primary communications tool used for interacting with faculty and other students. Table 46 includes overall summary emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to the course websites.
The emergent themes related to the course websites included *user friendly* website, *resources were readily available*, and participants interacted using *digital communication* tools. During the interviews, the majority of participants were complimentary regarding the design of the course websites. In contrast, one participant commented that the course websites were difficult to use and suggested some type of orientation would be helpful.

**Findings for Secondary Research Question 7: Introductions**

The overall summary of findings related to introductions addressed the following secondary research questions.

How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

The majority of participants were very engaged in posting introductions, while others copied their introductions from semester to semester and then made minor updates. Some participants were guarded with their personal information and were not sure how much they should divulge to his/her classmates. Participants perceived the purpose of the
exercise was to get to know one another and start the networking process. Table 47 includes an overall summary of the emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to introductions.

Table 47

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Introductions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>Level of Engagement</td>
<td>1) Very engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Guarded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Online experience more personal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes related to introductions described the participants as *very engaged* in posting and reading introductions but somewhat *guarded* with their personal information. Participants felt that introductions made the *online experience more personable*. When interviewing participants, several surprises surfaced pertaining to introductions. Two participants were compelled to withhold information on their identity. One participant was a member of the ethics committee at his hospital but never mentioned that fact during his introduction or coursework. Another participant stated she was a nurse, which was an accurate statement, but she was also a chief executive officer (CEO).
Findings for Secondary Research Question 8: Assignments

The overall summary of findings related to assignments addresses the following secondary research question.

What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

Participants found assignments that were applicable at work to be the most engaging. In addition, the participants viewed assignments that related to current events and those that were interesting, challenging, and thought provoking as engaging. Table 48 includes an overall summary and emergent themes associated with assignments related to engagement practices.

Table 48

*Overall Summary: Emergent Themes Related to Assignments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Engagement Practices</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assignments</td>
<td>Favorite Assignments</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Current events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaging Assignments</td>
<td>1) Applicable at work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2) Interesting, challenging, and thought provoking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Emergent themes regarding favorite assignments were assignments that were *applicable*
at work and related to current events. Emergent themes related to engaging assignments were applicable at work, interesting, challenging, and thought provoking. This research question was very interesting as each participant had a unique story. Participants enjoyed assignments that they could apply to real life situations at work. Participants talked about skills they learned during the program that they were able to apply to their workplaces.

Findings for Secondary Research Question 9: Discussions

The overall summary of findings related to discussions addressed the following secondary research question.

How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

Participants were very engaged in the discussions as a discussant and as a coordinator. The majority of the participants liked the discussions and were passionate about their opinions, especially when it came to the “right to life” debate. Participants reported that the first discussions were uncomfortable and intimidating, mostly because of the participants’ lack of knowledge. By the end of the program, participants were comfortable and engaged. Table 49 includes an overall summary and emergent themes associated with engagement practices related to discussions.
Emergent themes related to discussions were broken into four categories including course discussions, discussion coordinator, beginning of program, and end of program. The emergent themes for course discussions included time consuming discussions, and very engaged participants who enjoyed a thought provoking debate. Very engaged participants as discussion coordinator was an emergent theme along with being time consuming, and experiencing difficulty facilitating.

The emergent themes for discussions at the beginning of the program included uncomfortable and intimidating discussions, while at the end of the program, the
emergent themes were *comfortable* and *engaged* discussions. Moreover, during discussions at the end of the program, opinions were based on *applied knowledge gained from the program*.

**Findings for Secondary Research Question 10: Interactions**

The following research question guided the inquiry related to interactions during coursework.

*What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?*

Participants were actively engaged during the coursework throughout the online certificate program. Participants commented that they interacted with program faculty, other students, and members of the community. Participants interacted with program faculty when they had questions or problems using e-mail, telephone calls, and discussion boards. Participants interacted with each other during course discussions, when helping each other with assignments, and when meeting for lunch. Engagement tools used were discussion boards, chat rooms, e-mail, telephone, and face-to-face. Participants interacted face-to-face with members of the community during interviews for course assignments and sometimes when the participants needed information for an assignment. Table 50 includes an overall summary of the types of interaction and the emergent themes associated with interactions related to coursework.
Table 50

*Overall Summary: Interactions Related to Coursework*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Types of Interaction</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coursework</td>
<td>Faculty</td>
<td>Very engaged with faculty, other students, members, Members of the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members of the community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course content</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent theme for interactions related to coursework was that participants were *very engaged with faculty, other students, and members of the community*. During the coursework, participants were presented with opportunities weekly to engage with the program faculty and other students. Participants had varying degrees of access and interaction with members of the community.

*Overall Summary and Emergent Themes: Program Completion*

Program completion consisted of celebrating success, graduation, and interactions at program completion. Table 51 includes a summary of emergent themes associated with program completion.
# Overall Summary: Emergent Themes for Program Completion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program Completion</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Emergent Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate University</td>
<td>Congratulatory Communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success Home</td>
<td>Family Celebration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace Graduation Ceremony</td>
<td>Congratulatory Celebration</td>
<td>Proud of accomplishment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotions Related to program completion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Certificate</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactions at Program</td>
<td>Faculty and students from university</td>
<td>Transitioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Co-workers and Employer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion Family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The emergent themes for Program Completion were participants received *congratulatory communications* from the university (faculty, students, other graduates), *family celebrations* at home, and *congratulatory celebrations* at work. Another emergent theme was that participants were *proud of their accomplishments*, and the majority of participants had their certificates displayed in wooden frames in their offices at work. The emergent theme for interactions at program completion was *transitioning*. At program completion, interactions transitioned from the university to family and workplace.
Overall Summary of Major Findings

Participants’ Demographics

1. Participants consisted of a female population of non-traditional, in-state, computer competent, individuals with career, family, and community responsibilities.

2. Participants’ educational objectives were to earn the certificate and build an educational foundation that will assist in achieving their career objectives of career advancement and an application of new knowledge to the workplace.

Recruitment

3. Low cost marketing methods targeting local health care professionals and nursing entities attracted the participants who were searching for the convenience of an online program focusing on emergent topics in health care.

4. Word of mouth was the most prevalent marketing method discussed by the participants.

5. Participants contacted the program director and expressed an interest in the program. The program director was informative and provided an assessment to determine participants’ ‘fit’ for program. Program director fostered a helpful, friendly atmosphere.

6. Registration was quick, easy, and online. Faculty was helpful and responsive to the participants’ needs.
7. Most important course information included syllabi and topic/date outlines and participants used this information for time management and meet expectations ahead of schedule.

8. Interactions during recruitment were with the program director and/or program faculty member.

**Coursework**

9. Course websites were user friendly, resources were readily available, and participants interacted using digital communication tools.

10. Participants were very engaged in posting introductions but somewhat guarded with their personal information.

11. Participants felt that introductions made the online experience more personable.

12. Favorite assignments were applicable at work and based on current events.

13. Most engaging assignments were applicable at work and interesting, challenging, and thought provoking.

14. Participants were very engaged, enjoyed a thought provoking debate, and yet engaging in course discussions were time consuming.

15. Participants were very engaged but being the discussion coordinator was time consuming, and difficult facilitating.

16. At the beginning of the program, participants found the discussions were uncomfortable and intimidating.
17. At the end of the program, participants were comfortable and engaged. In addition, at the end of the program opinions were based on applied knowledge gained from program.

18. Interactions during coursework—Participants were very engaged with faculty, other students, and members of the community.

Program Completion

19. Participants received congratulatory communications from the university, family celebrations at home, and congratulatory celebrations at work.

20. Participants were proud of their accomplishment and participants had their certificates displayed in their offices at work.

21. At course completion, interactions transitioned from the university to family and workplace.

Discussion of Major Findings and Emergent Themes

Participants’ Demographics

The participants at the beginning of the online certificate program were predominantly female, non-traditional, computer competent, in-state with career, family, and community responsibilities. Kramarae (2001) found women were the primary users of online education. The women were found to balance work, family, community, and educational responsibilities. The findings from the present study were consistent with Kramarae’s research and national trend data reported by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2007).
Additionally, the literature on demographics of the online learner suggested that online learners were typically between 22 and 50 years of age, had full-time jobs, had childcare and other responsibilities, and had computer experience (Dutton, Dutton, & Perry, 2002; Nash, 2005; Yorke, 2005). Interestingly, when one of the male participants was interviewed, he said that he had children, but they were not his responsibility. He explained that he helped, but his wife was mainly responsible for the children. Consistent with this finding, Kramarae (2001) commented, “men with families,…consider family responsibilities to be at their discretion (p. 18).

Furthermore, the educational objectives for the participants were to earn the certificate and build an educational foundation. The career objectives were career advancement and application of new knowledge to workplace. Betts (2008) concluded that students searched for programs with assignments that mimic real world situations relating to the students’ workplace. The findings from this study were consistent with the findings from Betts’ work. One of the emergent themes from the present study was that participants described that their favorite and most engaging assignments were applicable at work.

Engagement Practices Related to Recruitment

Tinto (1975, 1993) and Rovai (2002) posited that the experiences and characteristics students have before arriving at college and the experiences the students have at college determine whether students persist and are successful. Tinto and Rovai agreed that academic integration is one method that can increase persistence.
and Natvig’s Model for Engagement suggested that engaging students early and often could have a positive effect on student persistence. The first strategic area of the Model for Engagement was recruitment. Angelino and Natvig’s model helped to explain the engagement practices used in the study, related to recruitment, consisted of marketing, initial contact, registration, and class information.

Participants first heard about the online certificate program from various local, low cost marketing methods targeting health care professionals and nursing students. The most predominant method was word of mouth. Yorke (2005) suggested engagement practices including marketing could enhance student persistence in online programs. The convenience of the online offerings and the relevance of learning about emergent topics in health care attracted the participants to the program. Müller (2007) found that highly motivated women who engaged in a learning community and had an appreciation for the convenience of an online program were more likely to persist to program completion.

Initial contacts with the program director or program’s faculty member (i.e., program faculty) were initiated by the participants’ interest in the program. Participants found the program faculty to be informative, helpful, and friendly. During the initial contacts, the program faculty interacted with the participants to determine if the online certificate program were a ‘fit.’ Yorke (2002) suggested that conducting initial assessments of students entering a program would increase student persistence to program completion. In addition, Rovai (2002) identified program ‘fit’ as internal factor for students leaving a program. If students felt that the program did not ‘fit’ their needs or expectations, they were more likely to leave a program before completion.
Registration was quick, easy, and online. Participants were pleasantly surprised the registration was so easy. If participants had questions, the program faculty was helpful and responsive to the participants’ needs. As an engagement strategy, Angelino and Natvig (2007) suggested that program faculty assist students when registering for classes. After registering, participants were given access to course information prior to the start of classes. Participants commented that the most important information related to courses was the syllabi and topic/date outlines. These tools were used for time management and to meet expectations ahead of schedule. Participants found having access to the course materials early allowed them to purchase books, start researching topics for coursework and discussions, prepare schedules of important dates, and orient to the technology that would be used in the courses. Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) suggested an early strategy for engaging the online learner was to provide orientation prior to the start of classes. Angelino and Natvig (2007, 2009) suggested that course websites should be designed early for students to review prior to the start of the courses.

In reviewing the theory, Moore (1989) identified the importance of learner-instructor interaction to stimulate interest in a course, motivate the student to learn, and deliver individualized support. Furthermore, engaging the student early and often can have a positive effect on student retention (Angelino & Natvig, 2007, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Minch, 1996). For the present study, engagement practices during the recruitment phase appeared to have a positive influence on the participants.

The overall emergent theme from the study associated with engagement practices related to recruitment was *managing the process*. Participants learned about the program
by word of mouth and local, low cost marketing methods targeting health care professionals and nursing students. Further, the participants were attracted by the convenience of an online offering and a desire to learn about emergent topics in health care. The participants who expressed an interest in the online certificate program initiated contact with the program director. During the initial contacts, the participants described the program faculty as informative and assessed ‘fit’ in a helpful, friendly atmosphere. Further, participants found registration was quick, easy, and online and faculty was helpful and responsive to participants’ needs. Participants found the syllabi and topic/date outlines were the most important information at the start of a course and were used for time management and to meet expectations ahead of schedule. Interactions during recruitment were with the program director and program faculty member.

Engagement Practices Related to Coursework

The second strategic area of the Model for Engagement was coursework. The engagement practices used in the study, related to coursework, consisted of introductions, assignments, and discussion. The first step in coursework was accessing course websites and interacting with content of courses. Participants found the course websites to be user friendly and all resources for the course were readily available. Participants found digital communication tools were useful when interacting with faculty and other students. Course websites provided a tool to engage students early and often using engagement practices aimed at increasing interaction between students, instructors, and course content
At the start of each course, virtual icebreakers such as introductions were used to allow students to get to know one another and the program faculty. The majority of participants were very engaged in posting and reading the introductions, while other participants were guarded in giving out too much personal information. Participants found introductions made the online experience more personable. In addition to facilitating students learning about their classmates and the program faculty, introductions assisted in helping students feel more comfortable in the learning environment (Anderson, 2004; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Carnevale, 2000).

Assignments focused on activities that were interesting, challenging, and thought provoking, while relating to current health care issues that were applicable at work. Participants were pleased with the assignment selection for the program. Each participant had a unique story to tell when describing his/her favorite assignment and his/her most engaging assignment. When selecting the most engaging assignment, the majority of participants selected an interview with a health care executive, manager, or director. As described earlier in the chapter, Betts (2008) concluded that students were interested in “work-integrated learning” and “practice-based assignments.” Angelino and Natvig (2007, 2009) suggested that assignments should require the student to interact with the instructor, other students, course content, and/or members of the community.

At the beginning of the program, participants described the discussions as uncomfortable and intimidating, but by the end of the program, participants felt
comfortable, engaged, and were able to apply knowledge gained from the program in their discussion postings. Participants were very engaged whether serving as a discussant or as a coordinator. All participants seemed to have enjoyed thought provoking debates. While the majority of participants enjoyed the discussions, some participants felt the discussions were time consuming and as discussion coordinators, they had difficulties facilitating discussions. Angelino and Natvig (2007, 2009) suggested that discussions could be student-led and centered on current events or student-initiated ideas for discussion topics. Moore (1989) described online discussions as a learner-learner interaction in a group setting.

During the coursework, participants were very engaged in learner-centered activities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Diaz & Bontenbal, 2001; Moore, Sener, & Fetzner, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2001) with program faculty, other students, and members of the community. Introductions, assignments, and discussions were designed purposefully to engage the participants in learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-community interactions. In general, the participants in the study had similar experiences as those found in the literature on student engagement.

The overall emergent theme from the findings related to coursework was that participants each had a unique experience focusing on career aspirations. Participants found the course websites were user friendly with resources readily available. Participants interacted with program faculty and other students using digital communications including e-mail, discussion boards, course website, telephone, library, web chat, instant messaging, and blogs. Participants were very engaged in posting their
introductions, but remained *guarded* in relation to their personal information. Introductions made the *online experience more personable*. Assignments that were *applicable to work* and *based on current events* described the participants’ favorite assignment, while assignments that were most engaging were *interesting, challenging, and thought provoking*, as well as, *applicable at work*. Participants were *very engaged* as both a discussant and discussion coordinator and *enjoyed a thought provoking debate*, but thought the discussions were *time consuming* and *difficult to facilitate*. At the beginning of the program, participants found the discussions to be *uncomfortable and intimidating*, while at the end of the program participants were *comfortable, engaged, and applied knowledge gained from the program*. During coursework, participants were *very engaged* with faculty, other students, and members of the community.

*Engagement Practices Through Program Completion*

The third strategic area of the *Model for Engagement* was post-coursework. The engagement practices used in the study, related to post-coursework, consisted of celebrating success and graduation.

Participants received congratulatory communications from program faculty, advisors, students, and other graduates when celebrating their success. In addition, the participants had family celebrations at home and congratulatory celebrations at work. Participants celebrated the most at work with promotions, articles in the hospital newsletter, lunches, and showed their certificates to co-workers. The majority of the participants displayed their certificates in their offices for everyone to see. The
participants were very proud of their accomplishments. During program completion, interactions transitioned from learner-learner and learner-faculty to interactions involving family members and co-workers. Literature on celebrating completion of an online program was sparse. Engaging graduates at course completion and continuing even after graduation could be beneficial to marketing the program. Alumni could prove to be an excellent recruiting and marketing tool for an online program. Findings from the study suggested that word of mouth was the number one marketing method that attracted the participants to the program. In addition, alumni could be invited back to mentor students and participate in discussions similar to guest lectures for programs taught face-to-face.

The overall emergent theme from the findings related to program completion was celebration of accomplishment. Emergent themes related to program completion focused on celebrations and included congratulatory communication, family celebration, congratulatory celebration, and proud of accomplishment. Interactions at program completion transitioned away from the university and focused on family and workplace.

General Recommendations for Higher Education

As the demand for online programs increases, administrators may have a need to evaluate the current structure of their online programs. Administrators may want to develop policies for designing effective online programs with focus on increasing student engagement, student retention, and student success. Accrediting agencies could use the study in developing and/or revising assessment criteria for evaluating engagement of the
online learner. The following are general recommendations for evaluating and redesigning existing online programs.

1. Evaluate marketing methods and determine if current marketing efforts are working. Design a marketing strategy focusing on the target audience and using alumni to market the program.

2. Evaluate coursework and determine if coursework is interesting, challenging, and thought provoking. Design coursework that is applicable to work.

3. Evaluate coursework to determine if coursework is learner-centered. Design assignments that students can customize their responses based on their work experiences or future career aspirations.

4. Evaluate the use of engagement practices in online programs. Design online programs purposefully engaging the students in learner-learner, learner-instructor, learner-content, and learner-community interactions.

5. Develop an assessment tool to measure engagement practice and develop standards of engagement that online courses and programs must meet.

6. Evaluate program completion and develop a tool to allow the online learner to attend graduation virtually with his/her classmates.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations are issues and topics for future research regarding engagement practices of the online learner and retention of the online learner.
1. Conduct future studies focusing on student retention and student engagement in online programs.

2. Conduct a study to examine strategies of engagement for alumni in marketing online programs, supporting online programs through scholarships and mentoring, and participating in coursework.

3. Conduct a study to examine if males and females have different engagement experiences in online programs.

4. Conduct a study to examine if traditional and non-traditional students experience different engagement practices when taking online programs.

5. Conduct a national study using a quantitative survey research design for tracking student retention and student attrition for online courses and online programs.

Overall Implications of the Study

The results of the study suggested that the online certificate program could be used to benchmark against when implementing new engagement practices for the online learner. The program illustrated how engagement practices of the online learner took place early and often, using engagement practices during recruitment and coursework. These engagement practices promoted persistence in the program.

Findings from the study revealed that consideration should be given to policy development and implementation for online courses and programs. Policies should include components that relate to recruitment and coursework. Given the increasing
numbers of students enrolling in online courses and programs, consideration should focus on faculty development, technology, and other resources.

Chapter Summary

The chapter presented the overall summary of major findings and emergent themes for each of the 13 secondary research questions, which guided the study. Major findings were presented and discussed including references to existing literature and the theoretical framework used to help explain the phenomena of the graduates’ (participants) experiences. The chapter concluded with general recommendations for higher education, recommendations for future research, and overall implications for the study.
Appendix A
Information Letter

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study titled, A Case Study on Graduates from an Online Certificate Program and their Experiences Related to Engagement Practices.

This study is being conducted by Lorraine M. Angelino, Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at Clemson University. Lorraine can be reached at (864) 229-3758 or (864) 554-0598. Dr. Frankie Keels Williams is the Principal Investigator and Dissertation Research Chair. Dr. Williams can be reached at (864) 656-1491.

The purpose of this study is to explore the graduates’ experiences with engagement practices in an online certificate program.

The requirements of the study include participation in a face-to-face interview, a telephone interview, or an online interview to answer questions related to your experiences in the online certificate program.

The interview will take about 45 minutes and will be conducted at a time that is convenient to you. The interviews will be audio-recorded if face-to-face or on the phone and transcribed for analysis. Participants will be sent the transcription of their interview and will be given the opportunity to verify for validity. Any information the participant would like to be deleted or changed will be made at this time as well. Participants may be asked follow up questions to the initial interview. Participants will be asked to assist in reviewing the findings as a method of validating the data.

By providing your insight into your experiences with engagement practices in an online certificate program, you will be helping students, program designers, faculty, and administrators.

Names of individual participants will not be identified in the study. The data will be identified by codes. At the completion of the study, digital recordings will be transferred to CD and stored in a secure location.

You will not be asked to discuss any issue that causes great discomfort and which you are not willing to discuss. You may decline to answer any question. The interview will be terminated at any point at which you are no longer comfortable proceeding. You will be given the opportunity to review the information you provided and determine if the information was accurately analyzed by the researcher.
There are no monetary incentives for participating in this study. Participants will receive gift bags valued at approximately $50 at the end of the interview process.

If at any time you change your mind about participating in this study, you are encouraged to withdraw your consent and to cancel your participation.

This research project has been approved, as required, for projects involving human subjects by the Institutional Review Board of Clemson University and by the Department of Educational Leadership.

Should you have any questions about this research you may contact: Lorraine M. Angelino, (864) 229-3758 or (864) 554-0598, Researcher/Interviewer, Clemson University or Dr. Frankie Keels Williams, (864) 656-1491, Principal Investigator, Clemson University. Should you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact: Clemson University Institutional Review Board (864) 656-6460.
Title of the Study:
A Case Study on Graduates from an Online Certificate Program and their Experiences Related to Engagement Practices

Investigator:
This study is being conducted by Lorraine M. Angelino, Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership at Clemson University. Lorraine can be reached at (864) 229-3758 or (864) 554-0598. Dr. Frankie Keels Williams is the Principal Investigator and Dissertation Research Chair. Dr. Williams can be reached at (864) 656-1491.

I. Study Purpose
• The purpose of this study is to explore the graduates’ experiences with engagement practices in an online certificate program.

II. Requirements for Participants
• Read the Informed Consent Form before the start of the face-to-face interview, telephone interview, or online interview.
• Participate in a face-to-face interview, a telephone interview, or an online interview and answer questions related to your experiences in the online certificate program.
• The interview will take about 45 minutes and will be conducted at a time that is convenient to you.
• The interviews will be audio-recorded if face-to-face or on the phone and transcribed for analysis.
• Participants will be sent the transcription of their interview and will be given the opportunity to verify for validity. Any information the participant would like to be deleted or changed will be made at this time as well.
• Participants may be asked follow up questions to the initial interview.
• Participants will be asked be requested to assist in reviewing the findings as a method of validating the data.

III. Benefits for Participating
By providing your insight into your experiences with engagement practices in an online certificate program, you will be helping students, program designers, faculty, and administrators.

IV. Privacy
• The data will be identified by codes.
• At the completion of the study, digital recordings will be transferred to CD and stored in a secure location.
• Names of individual participants will not be identified in the study.

V. Risks
• You will not be asked to discuss any issue that causes great discomfort and which you are not willing to discuss.
• You may decline to answer any question. The interview will be terminated at any point at which you are no longer comfortable proceeding.
• You will be given the opportunity to review the information you provided and determine if the information was accurately analyzed by the researcher.

VI. Compensation
• There are no monetary incentives for participating in this study.
• Participants will receive gift bags valued at approximately $50 at the end of the interview process.

VII. Withdraw
• If at any time you change your mind about participating in this study, you are encouraged to withdraw your consent and to cancel your participation.

VIII. Research Approval
• This research project has been approved, as required, for projects involving human subjects by the Institutional Review Board of Clemson University and by the Department of Educational Leadership.

IX. Participant’s Agreement and Responsibilities
• I have read and understand what my participation in this study consists of. I know of no reason that I cannot participate in this study, I have had all my questions answered and hereby give my voluntary consent for participation in this project.
• If I participate, I may withdraw at any time without penalty. I agree to abide by the rules of this project.

X. Contact Information
• Should you have any questions about this research you may contact: Lorraine M. Angelino, (864) 229-3758 or (864) 554-0598, Researcher/Interviewer, Clemson University or Dr. Frankie Keels Williams, (864) 656-1491, Principal Investigator, Clemson University.
• Should you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact: Clemson University Institutional Review Board (864) 656-6460.
Appendix C

Research Questions and Interview Protocol

The research questions for the study were developed based on the conceptual framework for the study. The central, overarching question that guides this research is as follows: How do the graduates of an online certificate program at a public university in South Carolina perceive their experiences related to engagement practices?

The following secondary questions were developed to guide the research study and will be asked during each interview:

Recruitment

1. What marketing methods attracted the participants to enroll in the certificate program?

2. What transpired during the participants’ initial contacts with faculty prior to registering for courses?

3. What did the participants experience when registering for courses?

4. What did the participants perceive as important when reading the course information before the start of each course?

5. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the recruitment phase?

Coursework

6. How did the participants perceive the course websites and interacting with the course content? What tools did participants find useful in interacting with faculty and other students?
7. How engaged were the participants in posting introductions? What did the participants perceive as the purpose of this exercise?

8. What assignments did the participants perceive as engaging during the online certificate program?

9. How engaged were participants during the course discussions and how did their perceptions change from the first discussion to the last?

10. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, other students, graduates, or members of the community during the coursework?

Program Completion

11. How did the participants celebrate success?

12. What did the participants experience at graduation time?

13. What interactions did the participants have with faculty, students, other graduates, or members of the community to celebrate success?
Appendix D

Institutional Review Board Acceptance

From: Rebecca Alley [/webmail/sm/src/compose.php?send_to=RALLEY@exchange.clemson.edu]
Sent: Monday, July 21, 2008 11:07 AM
To: fkw@CLEMSON.EDU
Subject: Your IRB protocol # IRB2008-225, entitled “A Case Study on Graduates from an Online Certificate Program and Their Experiences Related to Engagement Practices"

Dear Dr. Williams:

The Chair of the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) validated the protocol identified above using Exempt review procedures and a determination was made on July 21, 2008, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt from continuing review under Category B2, based on the Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46). You may begin this study.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. Any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events must be reported to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. You are requested to notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated.

Attached are documents developed by Clemson University regarding the responsibilities of Principal Investigators and Research Team Members. Please be sure these are distributed to all appropriate parties.

Good luck with your study and please feel free to contact us if you have any questions. Please use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Rebecca L. Alley, J.D.
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