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Virtual High School Graduates: A Phenomenological Study Investigating Transitions to Postsecondary Environments

Emily Green

Clemson University, erieste@clemson.edu

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VIRTUAL HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY INVESTIGATING TRANSITIONS TO POSTSECONDARY
ENVIRONMENTS

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
Emily Riester Green
May 2013

Accepted by:
Dr. Pamela A. Havice, Committee Chair
Dr. Tony Cawthon
Dr. Leslie Gonzales
Dr. William Havice

ABSTRACT

As education systems continue to grow and evolve with new advancements in technology, so do methods of instruction. Technological advancements have helped to further distributed learning, making instruction available to students in various geographic locations and times. Virtual secondary education is a form of distributed learning where secondary students complete their degrees fully online, outside of a brick-and-mortar school. There is a lack of information regarding the experiences of these students as they transition to traditional colleges and universities after attending virtual high schools.

This study sought to describe the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional colleges and universities. The study was qualitative in nature, and used phenomenological research methods to form an understanding of these experiences. The study was completed in the fall semester of 2012. A total of 12 virtual high school graduates from South Carolina virtual high schools were interviewed. Nine of the students were attending traditional, brick-and-mortar four year degree awarding higher education institutions, and three students were attending technical colleges.

The findings revealed four themes, two related to the academic aspect of the transition, and two related to the social aspects. The academic themes were time management and learning environment preferences. Participants indicated that attending the virtual high schools helped them to learn time management skills, which transferred to their skills in college.

Participants had a variety of learning environment preferences, and felt there were benefits to both online and face-to-face classes. The social themes were involvement and homeschooling misconceptions. Participants believed that involvement was key to success in virtual high schools, and staying involved in college helped their transitions. Participants also indicated that many peers and faculty had misconceptions that they were homeschooled. The overarching essence of the study revealed a need for more support and understanding of their educational backgrounds. Specifically, the participants perceived a lack of understanding about their backgrounds. Professors, administrators as well as other students could benefit from learning about virtual education. Additional studies following virtual high school graduates throughout their college experiences are needed. Further, forming support networks or programs for them would be beneficial for this student group.

DEDICATION

To Yancey, Elizabeth, Jonathan, and my family for their constant love and support.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Education in the 21st century is changing rapidly due to advancements in technology, changing methods of communication, and learning preferences. A report by the Pew Research Center stated that the Millennial generation valued technology and believed that technology itself sets the generation apart (Pew, 2010). As values and beliefs changed, so did preferences in learning. Millennial learners outpaced other generations in Internet and cell phone use. A recent study found that 95% of teenagers are online and 80% utilize social networking sites (Brenner, 2012). The quick and readily available acquisition of knowledge translated into Millennial students' preferences for education. In 2012, growth in online course enrollments in higher education increased. Presently, over 6.7 million college students are enrolled in at least one online course (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The proportion of all students taking an online class is at an all-time high, at 32% (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Enrollments in online secondary schools are also at an all-time high, with at least 600,000 course enrollments (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp (2012). Lowery (2004) reported that these changes require educators to update information systems and programs on a regular basis. In addition to updating systems, educators also have the opportunity to distribute knowledge across different mediums, which improves student access to higher education.

There are benefits in making information accessible to all students, and appealing to the Millennial generation, by utilizing technology that can be accessed any time or place. Students' interest in technology that exists outside of the school day can be

leveraged in a way that will facilitate collaboration and learning. Utilizing technology was helpful to overworked teachers and institutions in a time of budget cut-backs (Dede, 2011). Teachers can also benefit from training programs that prepare them to engage students in the 21st century learning environment (Dede & Richards, 2012). Dede (2011) recommended a new form of education, where learning is distributed along different formats and delivery systems. He stated, “In such a 21st century educational system, schools of education would prepare, license, and provide professional support for teachers, tutors, coaches, and mentors who were trained to orchestrate their coordinated activities through the use of a sophisticated technology infrastructure” (p. 4).

Virtual secondary education is a growing method of educational instruction. It is one way to facilitate new forms of learning, and encompasses some of Dede’s (2011) recommendations. This study investigated the experiences of virtual secondary school graduates as they transition to traditional brick and mortar institutions of higher education.

Chapter One presents the introduction and overview to this study. The chapter provides detail on the foundations of the study related to distance learning, and web-based learning. The chapter then outlines the need for more research, the study purpose, the guiding research questions associated with the study, and the significance of the study. Finally, a list of key terms is provided that relates to the topics of the study, in addition to the presentation of the assumptions and delimitations.

Distributed Learning

Distributed learning is a term that can encompass many aspects of various

learning and teaching techniques. In comparison, conventional face-to-face instruction involves education taking place between student and instructor in the same spatial and temporal proximity (Bates & Sangra, 2011). In distributed learning, students can be in various locations, but actively participate at the same time. Instructors can utilize videoconferencing, video chats, and synchronous discussion, among others. Students can utilize asynchronous communication on discussion boards or watch prerecorded lectures that are available online (Neff & Whithaus, 2008). Instructors can also utilize distributed learning while in the same space as students. Salas and Fiore (2007) reported examples of these techniques utilizing online videos, or including guest presenters in class who are conferenced into the classroom through videoconferencing technology.

Including a variety of distributed techniques in a distributed learning environment provides options for instructors and opportunities to facilitate learning (Holtzinger, Kickmeier & Ebner, 2009). Dede (2011) stated that educators should be aware of the benefits of distributed learning in order to reach all students. Creative utilization of multimedia devices and interaction can be differentiated in a way that is accessible and helpful to all learners (Dede, 2011). Although distributed learning is commonly described as distance learning and online learning, distance learning is actually a specific form of distributed learning and is described below.

Distance Education

Distance education is a specialized form of educational delivery that encompasses aspects of learning where an instructor or tutor is not physically present. This method of education has been occurring for over a hundred years (Keegan, 1980; Bates & Sangra,

2011). Correspondence courses were offered in Europe and the United States to offer course credits and degrees to students. These courses were offered in many different formats, aimed at enriching the educational opportunities of students. Satellite technology made distance education possible through a different medium, television. As technology improved, instructional video and television courses were offered more frequently in universities (Schlosser, 1994; Bates & Sangra, 2011). The reasoning for offering distance education courses at the university level included expanding the offering of certain courses, accommodating adult learners who also engage in full-time employment, professional training and economic resources as well as fostering educational innovation (Schlosser, 1994). As the invention of the satellite changed methods of education, the computer and Internet have also changed these methods.

Online and Web-Based Advancements

Major developments in technology that have occurred in the past thirty years have greatly affected the landscape of education (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Watson et al., 2012). Beginning in 1990, educational institutions invested in commercial administrative systems which impacted the ways in which students applied for college as well as other administrative functions (Bates & Sangra, 2010). Instructors began utilizing HyperText Markup Language (HTML) in 1994 to provide information about courses online in addition to creating learning management systems. These systems allowed students to access course materials, participate in discussion forums, answer test questions, among other options (Bates & Sangra, 2010). Certain states, such as California and Michigan, established virtual universities in order to offer courses (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

Currently, classes may be offered fully online for students, and new technology, including synchronous technology, may be utilized by professors to provide an engaging online learning experience. Technology may be used to enhance face-to-face courses, provide a situation for blended learning where students engage online and face-to-face, or participate in fully virtual courses/programs. Fully virtual education in the higher education realm has become commonplace, with most community colleges and traditional colleges and universities offering fully online courses and degrees (Bates & Sangra, 2010). Once policy makers acknowledged the benefits of online education by investigating the use of technology in college classrooms it was adapted for other environments (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

In K-12 education, the advancements in utilizing technology for fully online instruction have varied state-to-state where differing circumstances prompted educators to offer courses in the K-12 environment. The idea for virtual high schools in the United States originated with the president of the Concord Consortium, Robert Tinker, and the Superintendent of Hudson Public Schools in Massachusetts, Sheldon Berman in 1990. They both believed that virtual high schools could greatly increase course offerings, and tapped into resources such as experts in certain subject matter, who were limited by geographic location. They also believed that educators could use virtual learning to foster professional development (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

Tinker and Berman established what would become the Virtual High School (VHS) Consortium in 1994. Their goals for the program were to create a collaborative of schools that could share resources, provide professional development, develop a wide

range of netcourses, to create a program that was feasible and replicable, and finally to evaluate the program for nation-wide adoption (Zucker & Kozma, 2003). The program also outlined goals for courses offered in the program. Tinker and Berman proposed specialized courses, technical courses, innovative courses, courses that support school-to-work programs, and courses to assist students who's primary language was not English (Zucker & Kozma, 2003).

Virtual secondary schooling in the United States began in 1997 with the creation of the Virtual High School and the Florida Virtual School. Since the inception of these schools, virtual education has grown rapidly. At least 75% of school districts in the United States offered online courses to secondary students in 2009 (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Increases in online course availability and enrollments were projected to rise dramatically in the future (Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

As illustrated above, the landscape of education is changing rapidly due to online innovations. While virtual and online education is relatively well-researched in higher education, little is known about the virtual high school experience. Specifically, the transition experience of virtual high school graduates to traditional colleges has not been researched. This study was formed to develop an understanding of this emerging population: virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional brick and mortar postsecondary environments.

Need for Additional Research

As virtual secondary schooling becomes more prevalent and accepted in a highly technological society an understanding of the population of interest must be cultivated.

Students who graduate from virtual high schools should be understood in order to better assess the needs of students as they transition to college. Few studies have focused on the experiences of virtual high school students as they attend their virtual schools (Bennett, 2010; Darrow, 2010; Swicord, 2010). This study begins to form an understanding of the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to the postsecondary environment.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to begin to form an understanding of the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to a postsecondary institution. This study investigated the transition experience, related to student preferences and academic or social issues that students encounter. The emerging population of virtual high school graduates is yet to be understood. An investigation of the experiences of virtual high school graduates, and their academic and social preferences will be useful to higher education instructors, administrators, and student affairs practitioners.

Research Questions

To assess the experiences of virtual high school graduates in the post-secondary environment, the central research question of the study was: What are the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition into the traditional college or university?

Guiding supplemental questions included:

What academic issues do virtual high school graduates encounter when transitioning into more traditional postsecondary classrooms?

What social issues do virtual high school graduates encounter when integrating socially into the traditional postsecondary education environment?

Definition of Terms

The following terms related to this study are defined below. The terms virtual secondary/high school, online high/secondary school are used interchangeably. Additionally, traditional college/university and traditional postsecondary institution are used interchangeably.

- **Asynchronous communication:** A type of communication that occurs at various times, such as discussion boards and emails (Watson et al., 2004).
- **Brick-and-mortar high school:** A school that enrolls and instructs students in mostly face-to-face classroom environments (Watson, et al., 2004).
- **College and university based schools:** Secondary schools and courses sponsored by colleges and universities that deliver courses to K-12 students (Clark, 2001).
- **Consortium and regionally based schools:** A cooperative of schools across districts and sometimes states that contribute to content and delivery. These schools often cooperate with local high schools. Some examples of consortium schools include the Virtual High School (VHS) and the Colorado Online School Consortium (Clark, 2001).
- **Cyber charters:** Cyber charters are similar to brick-ad-mortar charter schools but instruction is primarily delivered over the Internet (Watson et al., 2004).
- **District-level supplemental programs:** A type of K-12 program that exists in many states, but are operated by individual, largely autonomous districts, and not

- tracked by state agencies (Watson et al., 2004).
- **e-Learning:** Content and instruction delivered by digital means, involving the use of computers (Watson, et al., 2004).
 - **Face to face/traditional instruction:** A method of instruction in which a student is physically present with the instructor in a classroom setting (Watson, et al., 2004).
 - **For-profit providers of curricula, content, tools and infrastructure:** These groups provide information and content to many virtual schools. CLASS.com and Apex are companies that act as vendors to provide virtual instruction materials (Clark, 2001).
 - **Local education agency based schools:** Schools that are operated by a single school district that primarily serve homeschooled students. Two well-known local education agency based schools are Washington public schools, and The Internet Academy (Clark, 2001).
 - **Multi-district cyber schools:** These programs are administered by multiple districts, and often make up a part of a formal consortium (Watson et al., 2004, p. 69).
 - **Non-traditional student:** A college student who does not match the definition of traditional student. The student may be a transfer student, previously homeschooled, a full-time employee, parent, among other factors (Miller & Lu, 2003).

- **Online learning:** Content and instruction are delivered primarily through the Internet (Watson, et al., 2004).
- **On-site mentor:** A person, such as a parent, guardian or other mentor, designated by an institution to provide face-to-face assistance to online students (Watson, et al., 2004).
- **Phenomenology:** "Researchers search for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52).
- **Postsecondary Education:** Education past the K-12 environment.
- **Private virtual schools:** Privately owned virtual high schools that primarily serve homeschooled students, and operate in a similar manner as private brick-and-mortar schools. Christa McAuliffe Academy is an example (Clark, 2001).
- **Secondary Education:** Education that takes place in the K-12 environment, including grades 9-12.
- **Single-district cyber charter schools:** An online program that is administered by a single district and provided to students within that district (Watson et al., 2004).
- **State-sanctioned/state-level schools:** Statewide schools that are typically operated by the state education agency or other consortium. Examples of statewide virtual schools include the Florida Virtual School and Michigan Virtual School (Clark, 2001).
- **Statewide supplemental programs:** Programs that provide individual courses to

high school students anywhere in the state who are enrolled in a physical school or cyberschool. These programs are authorized in some way by state-level authority (Watson et al., 2004).

- **Synchronous communication:** Communication that occurs in the same time-space such as a chatroom, face-to-face classroom or videoconference (Watson et al., 2004).
- **Traditional college/university:** A brick-and-mortar campus awarding Bachelor's degrees in the state of South Carolina. May be used interchangeably with traditional postsecondary college or institution.
- **Traditional college student:** A student enrolled in college full-time, between the ages of 18-24 (Miller & Lu, 2003).
- **Transition to college:** The process "is a period of passage between the old and the new, between associations of the past and hoped for associations with communities of the present" (Tinto, 1988, p. 444). During this period, students have begun to separate themselves from the past but have not yet fully integrated themselves into the new communities of college and the associated norms and behaviors (Tinto, 1988).
- **Virtual charter secondary schools:** Charter schools usually operated by local school districts and sometimes by non-profit organizations. These high schools operate under state regulations regarding charter schools. Connections Academy is a well known virtual charter school. Oftentimes these schools are also called cyberschools (Clark, 2001).

- **Virtual high school graduate:** A student who graduated from a fully virtual high school, and who attended the high school full-time for at least two years.
- **Virtual secondary school:** A state approved and/or regionally accredited school that offers secondary credit courses through distance learning methods that include Internet-based delivery (Watson, 2001 as cited in Barbour, 2009).

Assumptions and Delimitations

Certain assumptions and delimitations guided this study. As a qualitative research study, it must be assumed that participants provide truthful information. This study sought to understand the experiences of individuals, and the researcher assumed that the individuals were providing information unique to themselves, and not generalizing to all students. Sampling of the participants was purposive and unbiased. The researcher took the necessary precautions to protect the confidentiality and well-being of the participants. Also, the researcher avoided influencing the participants by asking unbiased questions.

Delimitations

This study is not generalizable to the entire population, due to the nature of the data collection and indented population of study. The study, however, helped to form the basis of an understanding of the experiences of a select group of individuals in order to provide a clearer picture of the college transition experience. The population of this study was limited to students in the United States, and it did not include international students. Further, the study does not form an understanding of all virtual high school graduates in the United States, because it focused on graduates of South Carolina virtual high schools.

Chapter Summary

Forming an understanding of the transition of virtual high school graduates to traditional colleges is crucial for student affairs professionals and educators. The transition period to college, particularly the first six weeks of college, is relevant in regards to retention (Tinto, 1988). This study explains the transition period of an emerging population, virtual high school graduates, to better understand the changing characteristics of college students. Social and academic issues were examined by utilizing phenomenological research methods to understand the overarching experience, as well as the academic and social issues that virtually educated students encounter in this transition.

An understanding of the experiences of students as they transition to college is beneficial to individuals involved in K-12 schooling, and also higher education. The landscape of higher education is changing rapidly because of for-profit and online education. To remain competitive with online high schools, traditional colleges must understand the experiences of the changing demographics of students. The increase in virtual high schools may contribute to an increase in virtual higher education enrollment if students are not satisfied with the technological availability and advancements used in traditional colleges.

Chapter Two discusses the current literature concerning the study providing a more thorough explanation of the issues. Specifically, the chapter reviews the current understanding of the literature related to the Millennial generation, transitions to college, theoretical models, and virtual education.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Virtual secondary schooling is a growing field of education and varies according to many complex policies and standards. This trend in education has emerged over the past decade and has continued to grow exponentially in enrollments and options (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Presently, students may enroll in public online secondary programs free of charge through state education programs or through public charter schools in most states (Watson et al., 2012). Students also have the option to take courses that are not available at their high school through virtual schools (Watson, et al., 2011). Though several studies have focused on virtual students and achievement, no studies were found that examined virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional colleges (Swicord, 2010; Lary, 2002). The emerging population of virtual high school graduates is complex; therefore the study sought to understand these students' experiences as they transition to traditional brick and mortar postsecondary environments.

The chapter provides a review of the literature related to the current study. Specifically, the chapter offers a discussion of the literature regarding the Millennial generation and how this generation relates to education and communication. A discussion of the literature related to college student transition, regarding both traditional and non-traditional students is outlined. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of virtual secondary education in the United States and in South Carolina. Forming an understanding of this emerging population and the experiences of student transition to

college is crucial for higher education professionals and student affairs practitioners who hope to provide a successful collegiate transition to new students.

Student learning and the college experience are impacted by many factors. Changes related to time and generational influences have impacted education. Currently, methods of communication, social interaction and learning have evolved due to access to new technology (Pew, 2010). Due to these changes a description of Millennial student characteristics is beneficial in order to understand the changing characteristics of college students.

Millennial Generation

The Millennial generation is impacting learning environments because this generation encompasses distinct characteristics and preferences. Sweeney (2006) defined the Millennial generation as starting at 1979 and stated that Millennial generation students typically preferred choices, flexibility, convenience and are impatient with delays.

The Pew Research Center (2010) stated that those belonging to the Millennial generation were “born after 1980, are more ethnically and racially diverse than older generations, more educated, less likely to be working and slower to settle down” (p.16). The distinct factor separating this generation from other generations involves the use of technology. Roughly a quarter of those under age 30 (24%) stated that technology was what sets their generation apart. Overall, more than twice as many residents of the United States thought that new technology made life easier (64%) rather than more complicated (26%). Even among Millennials there were significant differences in Internet

use. More than nine-in-ten White individuals (95%) and Black individuals (91%) were online in 2010. By comparison, only 73% of Hispanic Millennials reported they used the Internet or email at least occasionally (Pew, 2010).

Other authors defined Millennial students as traditional, liberal, socially aware and technologically-driven (Coomes & DeBard 2004, Junco & Mastrodicassa, 2007, Levine & Crueton, 1998). Millennial students were often characterized as being high-achieving, goal-oriented and academically focused. Additionally, these students were characterized as being team-oriented, culturally liberal, rule-bound, dependent and socially minded (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Due to the findings in the Pew data, as well as characteristics of Millennial students, several trends are worth exploring in the context of the study. The view that technology sets the generation apart and makes life easier has implications for education. In regards to online high school graduates, technology use in the classroom may be valued to a higher degree compared to previous groups of students. Also, demographic characteristics in regards to race/ethnicity indicated that there may be issues related to access to technology, and characteristics of the student population.

Social Interaction Changes among Millennials

Cummings, Lee and Kraut (2006) conducted a longitudinal study that evaluated social relationships as students transitioned to college. The study focused on the use of technological instruments such as instant messaging and social networking sites to evaluate the social changes students experienced as they transitioned to college. The researchers also evaluated the differences in changes related to geographic proximity and relationships as these changes

occurred when someone moves (Cummings et al., 2006). The main finding of the study revealed that those who communicated online more often with high school friends maintained their relationships more than those who communicated less frequently. Cummings et al. (2006) also found that those who utilized email and instant messaging remained closer with friends than those who only utilized in-person visits and telephone calls.

Elison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) investigated the popular social networking site, Facebook™, in relation to transition to college. Social networking websites allow students to communicate through various mediums such as synchronous chat, asynchronous messaging/posting, as well as photo and video posts. Elison et al. found that use of Facebook™ helped students keep in touch with old friends as they were transitioning to college. The use of the website also helped maintain or intensify current relationships. The website was especially helpful in bridging social capital and developing relationships, meaning that students were able to make connections to new friends and acquaintances through already existing relationships. They were also able to broaden their social networks. The bridging social capital, or new connections made through existing friendships, cultivated through the use of Facebook™ helped students become more aware of extracurricular opportunities and helped them to become more involved on campus (Elison, et al., 2007).

Students who were extremely involved in virtual communication, such as instant messaging, message boards and social networking sites, were more likely to utilize virtual communication to contact friends in times of severe stress as opposed to verbal communication (Massimini & Peterson, 2009). These findings demonstrated that online

communication may be one of the most utilized forms of communication for college students.

Characteristics of Students and School Choice

College choice and transition from high school to college is a complicated process. Ngyuen and Taylor (2002) found that the choice of college is affected by various factors including parent's education, geographic location, ethnicity and others. Type of high school institution was also a factor. There were significant differences in the type of high school (private/public) and school size and college choice. The emergence of new high school and college choices related to virtual secondary schools may further complicate the process. Virtual secondary schools are a relatively new phenomenon, with no known studies focusing on the learning and social outcomes of online high school graduates. Because online learners must be self-determined and motivated (Chen & Jang 2010), one may assume that these students will also be as successful in academics as traditional college students. The United States Department of Education (2009) found that students who participated in online learning do outperform their peers academically, but they cautioned that few studies have been conducted which evaluated K-12 learning and social outcomes.

Transition to College

Theoretical Foundations

Transition from high school to college is a difficult and emotional process. Change in geographic location, change in social group, and separation from parents were only a few factors that impacted students during this transition period (Cummings, Lee &

Kraut, 2006). Once students decide on an institution of higher education, their expectations are lofty. Students believed that the college experience would be overly positive with unlimited possibilities, but once the transition is made, students commonly experienced social and academic difficulties. Providing a supportive and structured atmosphere along with student programs helps with the college transition (Keup, 2007).

Schlossberg (1981) stated that people constantly experience change and transitions throughout life. These changes influence the lives of individuals in many ways, including new self perceptions, behaviors and networks of relationships. An actual transition, according to Schlossberg (1981), was an event or nonevent that resulted in a change in one's behavior or relationships.

Perception of the transition, characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition environments, as well as characteristics of the individual are interrelated and correspond to the success of the transition. Characteristics of pre-transition and post-transition are particularly useful concepts when related to the transition of virtual high school graduates to traditional college environments. The internal support systems (including family, intimate relationships and networks of friends), institutional supports and physical settings are evaluated. An individual's college transition period is much more successful if the individual has a strong support system. This support system can include close relationships as well as more informal support systems. Institutional supports include organizations, academic advisors, counselors, and even rituals such as graduation ease the transition process. Finally, the physical setting and the individual's preferences and happiness in a certain setting also affect the transition process (Scholssberg, 1981).

Successful transition to new atmospheres depends on the individual balancing resources, deficits and differences in the three characteristics of transition. The type of transition (anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent), the context of the setting related to the relationship of the individual and the setting as well as the impact of the setting can impact the individual. Oftentimes, the outcome of the transition has both positive and negative aspects, and depends on the perception of the individual experiencing the transition.

Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman (1995) also stated that the individual can draw upon four factors to assess benefits and drawbacks of a situation in order to cope. The *situation* regards the individual's current context, which can include duration, role change, previous experience, concurrent stress, timing and assessment. The *self* relates to the individual's understanding of themselves and how they can harness certain assets. These can include socioeconomic status, health, ethnicity as well as psychological resources including values and commitment. *Support* is the third factor that includes types, functions and measurement. Types refer to various levels of support an individual may have including family, institutional, intimate and friends. Functions refer to support including honest feedback and aid. Measurements are when an individual assesses changing supports and recognizes the importance of roles. Finally, *strategies* include ways to improve situations. Individuals can modify the situation, control stress, control meaning, seek information and take action (Schlossberg et al., 1995).

Tinto (1988) discussed the separation and transition periods students undergo when entering college, and Tinto based his work on the works of a Dutch anthropologist

named Arnold Van Gennep. Tinto (1988) stated that the inherent shift in community membership will likely result in students encountering difficulties. Any transition period is difficult for individuals because of stressors and new environments, but the stressors of transition to college are sometimes too difficult for students. Evaluating a longitudinal study, Tinto (1988) found that the first six weeks of school were especially crucial to the student's persistence. Also, a student's success and likelihood of returning for the second year are greatly influenced by a successful transition period.

Tinto (1988) identified several stages of the transition process. The separation period is the first stage in an individual's college career. This stage involves the student separating and disassociating themselves from their former identity that includes their former high school and place of residence. Depending on an individual's commitment to their past location, separation can vary in difficulty, but all students experience some form of separation. This period may be so stressful that students decide to leave college.

The second stage is transition to college. In this stage, students have begun to separate themselves from the past, but have not yet acclimated totally to the new norms and environment of college. This period can result in problems with persistence, because it can also lead to serious stress because the student is not tied to the past or the future. Some students are better-suited to withstand the stresses due to personality traits, but many students cope that have a difficult time. Institutional commitment and assistance can help students from all backgrounds during this stage (Tinto, 1988).

The third stage, incorporation to college, involves the student leaving the past behind but trying to assimilate with the college community and culture. Positive social

interactions with fellow students and faculty members help students incorporate into college. If the student does not experience positive social interactions, persistence at the college may be impacted. Some students are highly successful at incorporating into new social groups and extracurricular activities, while others are not. They must establish competent social and intellectual commitments to the communities of college, because without assistance, they are likely to leave. Even if students have incorporated into the college, they may not like these groups. These individuals, also are likely to leave the institution depending on their commitment and goals (Tinto, 1988).

Elkins, Braxton and James (2000) conducted a longitudinal panel study to reexamine Tinto's findings and theory. The researchers found that support was statistically significant to persistence, making the study of high school to college transition a valuable resource for practitioners wishing to increase retention at higher education institutions.

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement also provided a useful theoretical foundation for the study. Student involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). Highly involved students spend a great deal of time on academic work, as well as time devoted to organizations and interactions with faculty members and students. Involvement is an investment in energy, and lies on a continuum. The amount of learning and development was directly proportional to the quality and quantity of involvement (Astin, 1984).

Astin (1984) discussed several factors and groups of students related to involvement. Holding a job on campus was significantly related to persistence at the college. Spending time on campus through the student's employment increased the likelihood that the student will interact with other students, staff and faculty members. Retention did suffer, though when a student has a full-time job off campus. Another factor that positively impacted retention is place of residence. Students living on campus were more likely to become committed to the institution, as well as involved with faculty and students. On-campus residents were also more likely to become involved in extracurricular activities. Honors students were more likely to persist in college, as well as aspire to achieve graduate and professional degrees. Students who were intensely involved in academics may do well in school, but did not achieve deep friendships. The students still had strong institutional commitment and were likely to persist in college. Student athletes, as well as students involved with student government, are likely to persist in college. The factor that had the strongest relationship to satisfaction in college was frequent interaction with faculty members. The involvement of graduates from virtual high schools in college may also provide useful information regarding their experiences and retention.

In summary, Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transition was the main theoretical foundation for the study. An understanding of the transition process, common issues regarding transition and support structures are useful in understanding the transition of virtual high school graduates to a traditional college. Also, integrating Tinto (1988) and Astin's (1984) theories of retention and student involvement helped the researcher apply

Schlossberg's (1981) theory of transition to virtual secondary school graduates by acknowledging that students are a specific population experiencing a transition. In the following section, transitional experiences of traditional and non-traditional college students are outlined.

Transitional College Experiences of Traditional High School Students

Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg and Jalamo (1994) reported that the transition period to college from traditional brick-and-mortar high schools is a complex phenomenon and can differ according to the student's characteristics.

Traditional college students, who are not first-generation college students in their families, commonly see the transition period as a common continuation of life, something that is expected of them. Academic concerns, such as being able to make good grades, as well as social concerns, such as making new friends, are dominant concerns.

First-generation college students, who are the first members of their immediate family to attend college, demonstrated different concerns, such as the intimidating cultural transition to college. Students who resided on campus also identify transition as a shared experience. This perceived shared experience helped cultivate institutional pride, commitment to school, as well as increased participation in academic/social activities (Terenzini et al., 1994).

Transitional College Experiences of Non-Traditional Students

Miller and Lu (2003) reported that traditional students typically are characterized as full-time students between the ages of 18-24 years old. The term "non-traditional student" can encompass many characteristics. Some students may be older, have

families, work full-time or are transfer students from other institutions. This section will discuss some transition to college concerns related to transfer students, first generation students, and homeschooled students.

Transfer college students at times have difficulty when transitioning to four-year colleges. Large class sizes, different expectations and levels of involvement with professors produced “transfer shock” (Townsend & Wilson, 2004). The transfer shock period involved students experiencing difficulties adjusting academically and socially. One student stated, “I would have liked to have seen a course or something to just kind of prepare you as far as class sizes. I was never used to having more than 40 people in a class” (Townsend & Wilson, 2006, p.445).

First generation students also encountered barriers throughout the transition period to college. One student said when discussing the transition, “you need to be aware of this game before you start playing it to make sure that this is a game you want to play. Once you get to a certain level there is no backing out” (Gardner & Holley, 2011, p.83).

Several key factors facilitate a successful transition period from high school to college. A student’s perceived security to parents was a social aspect that has been found to be significantly related to a positive transition (Compas, Wagner, Slavin & Vannatta, 1986). Similarly, Smith and Zhang (2009) found that mothers had the largest positive influence on a student’s transition from high school to college. High school teachers, fathers, friends and high school guidance counselors also provided perceived helping behaviors. Interactions with a diverse group of peers have also been found to aid in the

transition process and enhance a feeling of belonging (Bowman, Locks, Hurtado, & Oseguera, 2008).

Transition Period for Homeschooled Students

The college transition experiences of homeschooled high school students were found to be similar compared to traditionally educated students (Medlin, 2000). Information on this particular group of students was included in the literature review because the students are similar to virtual high school students due to the fact that they are educated from home, out of a brick-and-mortar high school. Common issues involved loneliness, challenges with increased independence and meeting others with different values. Support services, both student and academic oriented, aided in the college transition process (Wessel, Bolle & Mulvihill, 2007). Medlin (2000) conducted a review of literature focusing on the socialization of homeschooled students and found that there were no differences in the socialization and interaction among homeschooled students compared to traditionally schooled students. In a study by Saunders (2009) homeschooled students exhibited significant institutional commitment, which positively affected persistence rates into the second year of college. In summary, the transitions of homeschooled students to college were similar to those transitioning from traditional brick-and-mortar secondary schools (Medlin, 2000; Saunders, 2009).

Based on the aforementioned findings, social support was a key aspect in a successful college transition. Social support may act as a buffer to counter the negative stressors encountered during a transition period. Several studies found that social support influenced a reduction in feelings of isolation, increased feelings of control, as well as a

reduction in depression and anxiety (Hayes, Saunders, Flint, Kaplan & Blazer, 2003; Holt & Esplage, 2003; Latkin & Curry, 2003). Further, research studies suggested that at-risk groups for psychological problems can be identified before they enter college, in order to help the students through the transition period (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, Vannatta, 1986). The college transition experience of traditional and non-traditional college students provides the background for the issues that virtual graduates may face as they enter college.

Virtual Schools

Virtual secondary education began in Canada in 1995, where services were extended to rural students (Barbour, 2009). In the United States, the first virtual school opened in Florida in 1997 (Barbour, 2009). The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) was created through a grant from the state on a 5-year contract. Within the first five years of the FLVS opening, more than 30 states had adopted some form of online program (Barbour, 2009). The growth has continued, as by 2005, there were 27 states that had state-level policies concerning virtual education. The growth is in addition to other states that operated for-profit or university virtual secondary education systems (Barbour, 2009). In 2006, there were 24 state-level virtual secondary education systems. Michigan was the first state to mandate beginning in 2006 that all high school students must successfully complete one online course in order to graduate (Barbour, 2009). Virtual schooling has grown substantially over the years and the categories of virtual schools vary according to the type of school and students served.

Types of Virtual Secondary Schools

The categorization and types of virtual secondary schools are complex and diverse due to differences in organization, funding, and state-level policy. Barbour (2009) stated that the most accepted definition of a virtual school was Clark's (2000) definition: "a state approved and/or regionally accredited school that offers secondary credit courses through distance learning methods that include Internet-based delivery" (p.4). Virtual secondary schools may be categorized in several different ways. Clark (2000), and Watson, Winograd and Kalmon (2004) created categories to define virtual secondary schools. Clark's (2000) seven categories included: a) state-sanctioned/state-level schools b) college and university-based schools c) consortium and regionally based schools d) local education agency-based schools e) virtual charter secondary schools f) private virtual secondary schools and g) for-profit providers of curricula, content, tool and infrastructure. Below is a summary of Clark's (2000) seven categories of virtual schools.

State-sanctioned/state-level schools: Statewide schools that are typically operated by a state education agency or other consortium. Examples of statewide virtual secondary schools include the Florida Virtual School and Michigan Virtual School (Clark, 2000).

College and university-based schools: Schools and courses that are sponsored by colleges and universities that deliver courses to K-12 students. Examples of these schools include The University of Nebraska Independent Study High School Online Diploma Program and CLASS.com (Clark, 2000).

Consortium and regionally-based schools: A cooperative of schools across districts and sometimes states that contribute to content and delivery. These schools often cooperate with local high schools. Some examples of consortium schools include the Virtual High School (VHS) and the Colorado Online School Consortium (Clark, 2000).

Local education agency-based schools: Schools that are operated by a single school district that primarily serve homeschooled students. Two well-known local education agency-based schools are Washington state public schools, and The Internet Academy (Clark, 2000).

Virtual Charter Schools: Charter schools usually operated by local school districts and sometimes by non-profits. These schools operate under state regulations regarding charter schools. Connections Academy is a well known virtual charter school. Oftentimes these schools are also called cyber schools (Clark, 2000).

Private Virtual Schools: Privately owned virtual schools that primarily serve homeschooled students, and operate similarly to private brick-and-mortar schools. The Christa McAuliffe Academy is an example (Clark, 2000).

For-profit providers of curricula, content, tool and infrastructure: Organizations that provide information and content to many other virtual schools. CLASS.com and Apex are companies that act as vendors to provide virtual instruction materials (Clark, 2000).

Additionally, Watson et al. (2004) defined common types of virtual secondary schools. The categories of virtual secondary schools listed by Watson et al. (2004)

include: a) Statewide supplemental programs, b) District-level supplemental programs, c) Single-district cyber schools, d) Multi-district cyber schools, and e) Cyber charters.

Below are definitions relating to the categories of virtual secondary schools (Watson, 2004).

Statewide supplemental programs: Programs that provide individual courses to students anywhere in the state who are enrolled in a physical school or cyber school. These programs are authorized in some way by state-level authority.

District-level supplemental programs: Programs that exist in many states; but because individual, largely autonomous districts operate them, and are not tracked by state agencies. In most cases, little is known by the state about the number or types of students taking courses in these programs; the knowledge that exists is often obtained informally by personnel within the state department and is not included in any reports or other publicly available information.

Single-district cyber charter schools: Program administered by a single district and provided to students within that district.

Multi-district cyber schools: Program administered by multiple districts, often in a formal consortium, not to be confused with a program a single district administers that even though it accepts students from multiple districts (Watson et al., 2004).

Cyber charters: Similar to brick-and-mortar charter school but instruction is primarily delivered over the Internet (Watson, et al., 2004).

The multiple definitions related to virtual K-12 schooling can be difficult to discern, and many terms exist on a continuum. Schools may vary according to

comprehensiveness related to full-time or supplemental course offerings. The reach of the school varies as well; some have a global reach while others have only district-wide reach. The location of the school, grade level, type of instruction and operational control also vary. Some programs may rely on total asynchronous technology, while others rely completely on synchronous. Additionally, level of interaction among students and faculty may vary (Watson, et al., 2010).

Virtual Education in K-12 Education

Virtual education is a growing method of instruction, but the predominant research has focused on postsecondary institutions. The Florida Virtual School (FLVS) was the first public, online high-school in the United States. It began from a grant from the state of Florida, and served over 154,000 students in 2008 (Brown, 2009). Presently, virtual charter secondary schools are emerging throughout the U.S. Reportedly, students perform academically as well or better than those enrolled in traditional high schools (Barbour and Mulchy, 2008). Virtual high schools also have been shown to increase graduation rates among students with disabilities (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer & Feng Liu, 2010).

Many states offer statewide online initiatives, but online education is not dispersed evenly across the country (Watson, et al., 2011). States such as Florida had 259,928 enrollments, and North Carolina had 99,716 enrollments in 2011. There remain states that have yet to adopt state level online programs, such as Arizona, Pennsylvania and Oklahoma (Watson, et al., 2011).

In 2009 the Sloan Consortium published a follow-up study evaluating the scope of virtual secondary education in the U.S. (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). The overall estimate of students enrolled in virtual education for the 2007-2008 school year was 1,030,000. The researchers reported that “69.8 percent of the school districts reporting had at least one student who had taken an online course in 2007-2008,” as well as, “an additional 12.3 percent of those which did not have any students enrolled in an online class planned to have at least one student take an online course within the next three years” (Picciano & Seaman, 2009, p.9). In addition the authors reported:

Three quarters of all districts (74.8 %) currently have students taking either online or blended courses with approximately another 15.0 percent planning to introduce them over the next three years. These data clearly reflect that the vast majority of American school districts are providing some form of online learning for their students and more plan to do so within the next three years (Picciano & Seaman, 2009, p. 9).

Many school districts, 66%, participating in online education anticipated that their enrollments would grow (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). These findings from the 2007-2008 school year suggested that virtual education in P-12 is growing rapidly. School districts reported that the projected growth of students taking online courses within the next two years (2009-2010) would increase 22.8% (Picciano & Seaman, 2009). Finally, the authors stated that the major providers for virtual high schools were:

- Postsecondary institutions;
- State virtual schools within the home state;
- Independent vendors; and
- Education services (Picciano & Stevens, 2009).

Rural schools especially depend on virtual secondary education. Lack of funding and other resources makes virtual learning essential for rural students.

The most recent with K-12 Online Learning Report: An Annual Review of Policy and Practice, written by Watson et al. (2012) reported current trends and demographics related to K-12 virtual education. Virtual education continued to grow substantially in all programs. A total of 617,847 course enrollments were taken by K-12 students, which was an increase of 16% since 2011 (Watson, et al., 2012). The authors also estimated that a total of 275,000 students were enrolled in 2012 and predicted growth in blended or hybrid programs (Watson, et al., 2012).

The authors reported in 2011 that single school district programs outpaced all other programs in growth (Watson, et al., 2011). While single school district programs grew, the multi-district online schools also grew. In the 2010-2011 school year, 250,000 students participated in these schools, which increased 25% from the previous school year. Additionally, 30 states offered full-time, multi-district secondary schools. Companies became more involved with secondary virtual education. Large private corporations such as Kaplan and Pearson Education have purchased large online programs such as Insight Education and Connections Education (Watson, et al., 2011).

The U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) acknowledged that online learning could potentially reach students with special needs by releasing a request proposal. The proposal was aimed to create a Center for Online Learning for Students with Disabilities (Watson, et al., 2011).

In summary, online learning continued to grow and expand over the years. Efforts were made to create content that could be used across states and to develop common standards. The private sector and government agencies have acknowledged the potential of online learning and became more involved by purchasing programs or proposing new ones.

National Demographics

The national demographics of online schools were reported for the 2010-2011 school year. Female students outnumbered male students at 55% in virtual learning. Student ethnicity demographics varied in online programs compared to face-to-face instruction. White students were overrepresented in the virtual high school student population at 59.2% compared to 54.89% of the nationwide population of students in traditional secondary schools. Native American Students are also overrepresented, making up 4.23 % of the online student population compared to 1.2% of the national population of students in traditional secondary schools. Black students represented 15.98% of online students compared to 16.95% of the national population of students in traditional secondary schools. Latino students enrolled in lower numbers in online classes compared to the national population of students with 16.46% of students online and 21.48% of Latino student enrollments at traditional institutions. Finally, Asian

students also represented online schools in lower numbers at 3.04% compared to 4.98% of the total population of students in traditional high schools (Watson, et al., 2011).

For special populations, online learning has become a popular concept because of the possible benefits for students. The representation of specific populations related to special needs and English as a Second Language students was lower in the 2010-2011 school year than previous years. Special education students made up 13.1% of the national population, but only 6.2% of online students were enrolled in online programs. English Language Learners comprised 2.3% of online students compared to 11% of students nation-wide in traditional high schools. Additionally, students who qualified for free and reduced-priced lunch were underrepresented. Online students who qualify for free and reduced-priced lunch consisted of 21.7% of the online population compared to 45% of the national population of students in traditional high schools. Watson, et al. (2011) recommended that these disparities be addressed, not only in regards to equity and access, but also to understand differences in achievement.

Reasons for Choosing Virtual Secondary Schools

Virtual high schools may be the last option for many students, particularly students with disabilities. The support offered through flexible course schedules, individual tutoring and accessibility has been found to help a student's achievement (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer & Liu, 2010). Although students may not have the typical face-to-face interaction as a traditional high school, the experience is still valuable. A valedictorian of Florida Virtual High School stated, "Although we didn't elect a

homecoming queen, hold pep rallies, or eat lunch together on a daily basis, we are a part of something particularly special” (Sampson, 2009, p. 1).

Several factors may influence students’ decisions to enroll in online classes at the high school level. Students choose to take online classes because they perceive they have more control over time to participate and complete the class. According to Robyler (1999) one high school student reported that, “distance learning courses at the high school level are acceptable, but that face-to-face interaction with both students and instructors in college ‘prepares you for real life’” (Robyler, 1999, p. 186).

Many of the students who chose virtual schooling felt that the choice and flexibility was crucial in the decision to attend virtual high schools. One student in Roybler’s (1999) study stated that virtual high school courses “lets me hold down a job and take courses at the same time” (Roybler, 1999, p. 167). Course flexibility is another option that was found to be appealing to students “I like the variety that online classes offer. I don’t have any of these courses offered in my school. It gives me more opportunities for AP courses, and I like doing my work on my own terms” (Scheick, 2007, P, 103).

Additionally, one student felt that the traditional high school was more impersonal compared to the virtual high school, where there were more opportunities for one-on-one interaction with instructors (Roybler, 1999). This particular student felt that it was difficult to reach out to instructors in traditional classrooms, where there were more students. In summary, there are many reasons students may choose to participate in online learning including a flexible schedule, and additional course choices.

According to a dissertation study regarding online learning by Lary (2002), 27% of students enrolled in an online secondary course because they needed it to graduate. Over a quarter of the students, 25.7%, enrolled because they preferred to learn at their own pace. Some students, 15.5%, chose to take an online course because of schedule conflicts with face-to-face courses. Homeschooled students comprised 11.8% of the students studied, and 7.5% of students enrolled in an online course to raise their grade. Finally, 5.4% of students enrolled in a course because it was not available at their high school, and 1.7% enrolled because of medical reasons. These findings coincided with the preferences of Millennial students, who valued flexibility and choice (Sweeney, 2006).

Finally, one dissertation by Schieck (2007) focused on the social and academic experiences of virtual high school students. The primary reason students enrolled in online courses was because they wanted control over the timing and pace of their learning. The diverse course offerings through virtual high schools were appealing to many students. Interaction varied according to student and the course taken. Some students expressed dissatisfaction with the interaction among peers at the virtual high schools, while others expressed satisfaction in their ability to interact with students from different areas of the state. In regards to course difficulty, students believed that online courses were more difficult compared to face-to-face courses. The difficulty in the courses provided perceived benefits to the students who believed that taking online courses prepared them for college because they had to learn time management and self-discipline skills. In summary, the Schieck (2007) study found that virtual secondary education appeals to students because of flexibility and course offerings. The satisfaction

with social engagement varied according to course (Schieck, 2007). The next section describes virtual secondary schooling in South Carolina.

Virtual Public Charter Secondary Schools in South Carolina

According to the South Carolina Annual Report Cards for the 2011-2012 year, there are five public virtual high school options. The Provost Academy opened in fall of 2009 and had an enrollment of 1,102 students. South Carolina Connections Academy opened in 2008 and had an enrollment of 2,794 students. Palmetto State E-Cademy, formerly the Insight Academy, founded in 2008 had an enrollment of 347. Finally, the South Carolina Virtual Charter School opened in 2008 and had an enrollment of 3,496 students (South Carolina Department of Education, 2012). A fifth school, South Carolina Whitmore School opened in August, 2011. It is a year-round school with no semesters. The SC Whitmore School graduates were not included in the study due to the recent opening. The following sections describe the four virtual schools in more detail regarding accreditation, curriculum and mission.

Palmetto State e-Cademy

Palmetto State e-Cademy is an accredited fully virtual high school, with state-certified teachers. The school is a part of the South Carolina Public Charter School District and is accredited by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), AdvanceED and the Northwest Accreditation Commission. The teachers lead weekly synchronous online sessions and also provide individualized support. There are over 100 courses, and students have options to connect through field trips, social outings and social media (Palmetto State e-Cademy, 2012). The mission of Palmetto State e-Cademy is “to

provide South Carolina youth an opportunity to realize their potential in a superior online learning environment” (Palmetto State e-Cademy, 2012a, p.1).

Provost Academy

Provost Academy is a fully virtual high school that is a part of the South Carolina Public Charter School District with state-certified teachers. It is one of three schools that are part of a national group, the others located in Georgia and Colorado. The foundation of the courses are Edison Learning eCourses, which utilize a virtual campus, interactive science labs, podcasts of each lesson as well as digital forums and blogs. Students also have options to engage in extracurricular activities (Provost Academy, 2012). The mission of Provost Academy is:

To provide a challenging, enriching, and meaningful curriculum that educates and respects the individual student and the diverse community of learners in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning. We believe in providing students with the tools necessary to meet high academic expectations and achieve academic success, thus building the skills and confidence needed to become intelligent, ethical, responsible, and civic-minded adults (Provost Academy, 2012a, p.1).

South Carolina Connections Academy

South Carolina Connections Academy was the first virtual high school to open in South Carolina. It is a part of the South Carolina Public Charter School District and serves students grades K-12. It is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges & Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SCAS CASI). All teachers

are certified through the state of South Carolina. It is a part of AdvanceED, which is an organization that represents districts and schools in the U.S. as well as internationally. There are satellite brick-and-mortar campuses in over 20 states as well as a national school located in Baltimore, Maryland (Connections Academy, 2012). The school provides events for students as well as extracurricular activities. There were 113 graduates for the 2012 school year (South Carolina Connections Academy, 2012, p.1). The curriculum is diverse and tailored to the needs of students (South Carolina Connections Academy, 2012). The mission of South Carolina Connections Academy is “to maximize academic achievement for students in grades K–12 throughout the state of South Carolina who need options beyond the traditional classroom.”

South Carolina Virtual Charter School

The South Carolina Virtual Charter School (SCVCS) is a part of the national program K12. All teachers are licensed through the state of South Carolina, and it serves students grades K-12. SCVCS is accredited through the South Carolina Public Charter School District. The school reported that only thirty percent of the time students are “in school” occurs online. The rest of the curriculum relies on handouts, textbooks and other hands-on materials such as telescopes. Students spend an average of six hours on coursework a day. The school holds public events and field trips for students as well as extracurricular activities. The curriculum includes learning options for students and over 90 courses (South Carolina Virtual Charter School, 2012).

Figure 2.1 summarizes the virtual secondary school information in South Carolina including accreditation, district information, national affiliation, 2011-2012 enrollment information as well as 2012 graduation information.

School	Accreditation	District	National Affiliation	2011-2012 Enrollment	2012 Graduates
Palmetto State e-Cademy	National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), AdvanceED and the Northwest Accreditation Commission	South Carolina Public Charter School District	None, statewide school	368	61
Provost Academy	South Carolina Public School District	South Carolina Public Charter School District	Provost Academy, other schools in Georgia and Colorado	1,102	135
South Carolina Connections Academy	Southern Association of Colleges & Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SCAS CASI).	South Carolina Public Charter School District	Connections Academy, schools nationwide and internationally	2,794	113
South Carolina Virtual Charter School	South Carolina Public Charter School District	South Carolina Public Charter School District	K12	3,600	111

Figure 2.1. Virtual secondary school profiles.

Chapter Summary

The growing field of virtual secondary education is in need of further investigation. Virtual high schools have been shown to be effective and useful for certain students (Barbour & Mulchy, 2008; Repetto et al., 2010). The Sloan Consortium

outlined the current trends in enrollment among virtual high school classes, but there is a significant lack of information regarding fully virtual high schools. Predictions for virtual high school enrollment indicate that there will continue to be an increase (Picciano & Seaman, 2009).

Transition to college is a difficult process and may be influenced by a number of factors (Cummings et al., 2006). Several theoretical models may be useful in the process of developing a strategy to understand the college transition experiences of virtual high school graduates (Schlossberg, 1981; Tinto, 1988; Astin, 1984). Social support, interaction among peers and successful intervention strategies assist in a smooth transition period from high school to college (Brown, 2009; Locks, Hurtado, Bowman & Oseguera, 2008; Compas, Wagner, Slavin, Vannatta, 1986). An evaluation of the transition of homeschooled students indicated that there is not a difference in the experiences of homeschooled students compared to traditional students (Medlin, 2000). The experiences of virtual high school graduates compared to traditionally educated high school graduates may be similar due to the changes in social interaction related to technology (Cummings et al., 2006).

Given the findings in the literature, a qualitative study evaluating experiences of virtual high school graduates transitioning to a traditional college environment helps form an understanding of current issues among college students. These issues are related to transition to college, academic achievement and social interaction among students.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter Two outlined the relevant literature pertaining to the topic of virtual education, and transition from high school to college. This chapter outlines the methodology that was used in the study. First, the research questions are outlined that focused on virtual high school graduates experiences as they transition to traditional postsecondary institutions. The pilot study methods and findings are discussed, along with any changes that were made after the initial pilot study. Participant information and selection processes are outlined, as well as the reasons for choosing such methods. The data collection and analysis techniques are described. Specific details regarding phenomenology and bracketing are discussed. Finally methodological considerations are presented.

Research Questions

To form a full understanding of the experiences of virtual high school graduates transition to traditional institutions of postsecondary education, the main research question was:

What are the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition into the traditional postsecondary educational environment?

Two supplemental overarching research questions pertaining to specific issues that virtual high school graduates may face during the transition period included:

- What academic issues do virtual high school graduates encounter when transitioning into more traditional postsecondary classrooms?
- What social issues do virtual high school graduates encounter when integrating socially into the traditional postsecondary education environment?

Data Analysis and Evaluation

The nature of the investigation was interpretivistic because it sought to understand and explain human and social reality (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivism is a school of thought that posits that humans engage with the environment around them to make meaning of their lives and situations. Meaning arises out of interaction with society, culture and other individuals, and each individual's meaning is distinct (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology of interpretivism involves two main methods: a) symbolic interactionism and b) phenomenology. This study utilized the method of phenomenology in order for form an understanding of the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional postsecondary environments. The belief of the self and object are main points of phenomenology, meaning that the object cannot be described separately from the subject, and vice versa (Crotty, 1998). Because individuals are a part of the world, the world cannot be described apart from the individual. Phenomenology requires that individuals engage with their environment and make sense of it. The individuals considered in this particular study, have engaged in a distinct phenomenon, and have a unique transition experience because of this phenomenon.

The goal of phenomenology is to reduce meanings (both textural and structural) of experiences to a description that pertains to all of the participants of a study. The

textural description relates to what the participants experienced while the structural description relates to how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). The overarching description is termed essence, meaning that the experiences are reduced in order to understand the essentials.

The analysis of this study follows the steps and guidelines postulated by Moustakas (1994). The interviews with the participants were transcribed, and the analysis began with the first step, *bracketing*. This step consists of the researcher setting aside all preconceived notions to best understand the participant's experiences. This step also involves researchers describing their full experience of the phenomenon, to better focus the analysis on the participants as opposed to the researcher (Creswell, 1998). This step is essential. The researcher suspended all judgments about what is "real" so that the researcher's bias is not projected to misconstrue the experience of the participants (Creswell, 1998). There were also considerations related to the intentionality of consciousness (Giorgi, 1994). Reality of objects depends on one's consciousness of it, making one's experience unique and individualized (Creswell, 1998).

Bracketing and the Role of the Researcher

Bracketing of this data was comprised of several steps. This section is in first person, because I described my bracketing process in accordance with Conal and Sinclair's (2010) recommendations. Although it may be impossible to leave all preconceived notions out of the research, reflection can help authenticate the research (Haggman-Laitila, 1999). Conal and Sinclair (2010) stated that assumptions and judgments, biases, beliefs, presuppositions, experiences, and pre-understandings must be

bracketed. To bracket this study, I acknowledged past information and knowledge gained through schooling. I was raised in an upper-middle class household by parents who both obtained Doctorate degrees. My parents encouraged me to engage in educational pursuits and sent me to private school through eighth grade to gain an education that was, in their opinion, more flexible and student-driven. I acknowledged that most students do not have the same experiences as I did as a child and access to more privileged forms of education. After middle school, I did experience a somewhat difficult transition to public high school because I went from a small class to a large high school of over 1,500 students. This transition was made easier because I had made many friends through basketball camp. My transition from high school to college went smoothly. I went to a public high school and a public college, where I lived on-campus and adjusted well after the initial period of adjustment and homesickness was over.

During undergraduate and graduate school, I completed and helped teach courses through face-to-face, online and hybrid formats. I acknowledged that these experiences were unique to myself and cannot be applied to anyone else. My experiences in online courses have been positive, but I acknowledged that all learners, courses and experiences are different.

Before each interview, I tried to start fresh, acknowledging that each student was from a different background, and experienced different things. After each interview, and while transcribing, I attempted to acknowledge any times when I inferred my knowledge on the participants. I also reflected on my openness and organization according to Conal and Sinclair's (2010) recommendations.

After every interview, I wrote notes if there were any issues where I may have imparted my knowledge on the participant and throughout the process I listed what I knew about the topic, and continued to bracket (Giorgi, 1994). I noted several times that I would infer my knowledge about online courses in relation to difficulty and self-motivation when I was speaking to the participants (See Figure 3.1). For instance, when a student stated that online courses are more difficult to them because of the amount of reading, I would agree and say that they consisted of more reading during my experiences as well. After noticing this issue, I made it a point to let the participants describe their transition and courses without affirming any of their descriptions. In realizing that it was an issue, I made the attempt to acknowledge it and allow it to be an opportunity to have the student provide richer descriptions. When a student would mention the course being difficult because of more reading, I would ask in what other ways were they more or less difficult.

In summary, to attempt bracketing, I acknowledged my past experiences, past knowledge on the topic, and attempted to start fresh with each participant, while noting any issues along the way to allow the participants to describe their experience (Lavery, 2003; Conal & Sinclair, 2010). My notes on the bracketing process are listed below (See Figure 3.1), as well as the possible improvements that I attempted to make in the subsequent interviews.

Time	Thoughts/Suppositions	Possible Improvement
After pilot study	The pilot study went well, the participant seemed well educated and enjoyed talking about her experiences. She was a homeschooled student, perhaps many of the virtual grads are? Are there differences in students who have been homeschooled all of their lives compared to others who are starting virtual high school from traditional public schools?	Acknowledge that all participants are individuals and that the pilot study revealed a stigma, but it doesn't apply to all situations.
After first interview	Some concern about participants wanting to share information, and if it is too early to interview in the semester. When a student has health issues, how much should a researcher ask?	Ask the next student to describe the situation in their own words and to expand on their statements. Follow-up interviews may help.
After second interview	More concern about the students not wanting to talk about their experiences or issues. Participants seem offended when asking about social concerns, they defend themselves, perhaps related to the stigma of online schools.	Ask the students to expand more about issues, without offending them. Remember this isn't a survey—try to stop the tendency to ask short yes/no and closed questions. Utilize more open-ended questions.
After third interview	These participants all seem self-sufficient and grown-up. Their transition was similar to mine in that some took college classes in high school—their experience was still different. It is difficult to not make generalizations about the participants because there are some similarities arising. Again, they are offended about social questions.	Acknowledge that all participants have different backgrounds, different reasons for choosing virtual schools and all have different situations on campus (where they live, major, extracurricular activities). Try to get participants to talk more on their own without my questions.
After fourth interview	Again, a pattern seems to be forming, the participants seem mature and self-sufficient—who am I comparing them to? Myself, friends and siblings at that stage? Why am I comparing them? Why am I relating my knowledge to online classes to theirs when high school and masters classes are very different? It is a difficult task to have a dynamic conversation without talking about my transition.	Try not to form patterns and generalizations—that will happen after all of the interviews. Keep asking them to talk—engage in a conversation without imparting opinion if at all possible.
After fifth interview	The participants are at a vulnerable time in their lives and it is necessary to talk about my experiences a little. They seem to want some verification, it may help to ask them to compare their friends who went to traditional high school to their experiences now. I didn't give much consideration to the fact that many of the students are emotional about the reasons that they needed to attend virtual high school. In the literature, there wasn't much information about that.	Use care in the conversation, if the student seems emotional or if it seems like the topic is too difficult, gently guide the conversation to a less emotional topic.
After sixth interview	Participant was certainly offended by my questions about stigma and social life, not offended by my questions but about their experiences with others. These students still seem self-sufficient and more	Keep in mind that although there are definite similarities, that each individual has their own story—don't guide the

	grown-up in ways. Why compare? Also, I shouldn't automatically assume that participants are good at time management because online courses require it.	interview where you "know" it will go because the others talked about the same things. The participant may want to talk about other issues.
After seventh interview	Again, participants are at a vulnerable part in their lives, and it was difficult to hear about her issues and remember my own issues with roommates and the accident that happened in the dorm. The social issues seem much more difficult to manage compared to the academic.	Try to use care and be supportive in the interview if the participant is having a difficult transition. Remember the participant may still be sensitive to the issues in the follow-up.
After eighth interview	It is almost impossible to keep all feelings and thoughts out, especially when students tell you about bad things that happened to them. Technical college students seem to experience very different things compared to the traditional college students.	Keep the conversation going and be supportive of the students. Sometimes it is necessary to give advice to them, but try to keep it until the end of the interview when they've told their story.
After ninth interview	It seems to be getting easier to keep the conversation going without inferring knowledge	Keep asking similar questions
After tenth interview	No issues, participants seem to be happy to share their knowledge	Keep asking similar questions
After eleventh interview	No issues	Keep asking similar questions
After twelfth interview	Participant again seemed offended by social questions, it is difficult to describe the reasoning behind the questions without inferring knowledge about past participants	Explain to the best of your ability, try not to offend the participant but keep the conversation going

Figure 3.1. Bracketing notes.

Horizontalization and Clusters of Meaning

The second step entailed *horizontalization* where every significant statement was listed, each having an equal value. During this step, the transcripts were reviewed, and each statement was listed in the participant's own words. This process was conducted by reviewing individual transcripts and listing the quotes according to topics. Any redundant information was omitted. Figure 3.2 provides an example of the horizontalization process.

Guiding Question	Relevant Quotes
Reason for attending virtual high school	<p>Uh, I had quite a few health problems when I was in high school and it was just easier to go to school from home.</p> <p>I just wanted to try it, I wasn't planning on going all three years but I ended up liking it and just thought I might as well finish out.</p> <p>I wasn't happy in my high school, just typical high school stuff. I kinda wanted to get ahead and it was better for me to do online school. I worked too, so I did online high school and took dual enrollment classes. I've gone into college way far ahead and graduated early. So, it was a really good thing for me.</p> <p>Well, I grew up in Christian school, and I actually went to (school) from day care to eighth grade, I've never been to a public school before. The one in our area isn't the greatest honestly, and my parents thought that it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go there. We really didn't know what I was going to do so in 9th Grade I went to a Christian school in (town), so after that they were getting ready to close the school. My aunt had heard about (school), so I decided to give it a shot and sign up for it, so I really liked it and did it until I graduated.</p> <p>My dad was, he was transferred overseas to Japan, I had to be there at the time also. And so, you know I couldn't be at the home school, but I had to get the state requirements, because I don't speak Japanese very well.</p> <p>I decided to go...well (laughs) my parents decided for me to go to (school) um because my last year at middle school, because I was having a lot of issues. I wasn't happy and cried all the time, and so, it was more of a social thing. I needed to get out of the situation and so I went to (school).</p> <p>Supplementary Interview: Um, up to that point my mom had homeschooled me, since 5th grade, and she was a little worried about the high school transition, she wanted to make sure I got a good foundation because we</p>

	<p>always planned for me to go on to college. She wanted to make sure that my math and science areas where she may not teach as well didn't lack. And she told me just to try it, do it for a couple of months, if you don't like it we'll go back to homeschooling. I ended up loving it and I stayed there my entire four years.</p>
<p>What was it like attending virtual high school?</p>	<p>Yes I mean both of my parents are professors and they've taught a lot of online courses so I've been dealing with that for a long time so, I was familiar with the format with it</p> <p>Yes I did, I enjoyed it</p> <p>I worked too, so I did online high school and took dual enrollment classes. I've gone into college way far ahead and graduated early. So, it was a really good thing for me.</p> <p>Actually (school) had more opportunities than my school in 9th grade, the school I went to only had sports, they didn't have any leadership opportunities. At Provost, I was president of the National Honor Society, I was in Peer Leaders Club, where you help students that are struggling with online classes, I was in Yearbook Club for all three years, which was challenging, because you have to work on the yearbook online, you have to have good communication, and not everyone sits in front of the camera, so I had to send out announcements. I was in so many different clubs, and I feel like I was more involved at (school) than my previous schooling. Peer leaders was through phone calls, they also have a research lab that's online, kind of like a video game where you go online and create your person, and you walk around this virtual research lab and you can chat with other students online and stuff</p> <p>It was, it was really different, as I said I didn't like it. The classes, obviously it is harder to maintain a schedule when it's not, when you are not physically present so it was all online.</p> <p>Well I definitely felt like I connected with my teachers a lot, I wasn't intimidated to ask them a question, which I was before at regular school. That was really good for me. I would get up and go for a run, eat breakfast and then do school, just you know chill out.</p> <p>I was in book club, history club, and civics club</p>

	<p>(laughs) Um, we had online monthly meetings. Book club was my favorite because we would all be reading a book that emotionally we were attached to and then we would get to discuss it, you learn, I mean, even though you aren't sharing a classroom with them, you do have similarities with them. You know, a lot of people don't think that.</p> <p>Supplementary Interview: Um, it was kind of a change but not that different from the homeschooling. The difference was my mom set out my work before but I had to learn different because the work would come up and just fly by if I just let it go. If I took a day off I would have work sitting there, and that would be two days worth of work.</p> <p>Yeah, it's definitely more self paced, you know but I did have the freedom, so math isn't my strong area, so I could work two weeks ahead, in something like history or English and have more time to devote to math. You have the option of how to work at your own pace, and a lot of the teachers are really helpful about you know stopping the work and giving you time to catch up.</p>
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Figure 3.2: Example of horizontalization.

The third step consisted of constructing *clusters of meaning*. This step involved clustering the statements into themes, removing statements that have been repeated (Creswell, 2007). Themes emerged out of clusters, and when themes were central to all interviews, the essence was described (Hycner, 1985). Other evidence including artifacts and information available online regarding virtual high schools was also considered. For example, the different virtual high schools published information through a blog post where the students discussed their experiences. Additionally YouTube videos were posted where students discussed their experiences, and the information was similar to the information that other participants provided during the interviews. Participants were promised confidentiality, and the links and citations to these sources cannot be revealed,

however the information gathered through these sources aided in the trustworthiness of the research by confirming participant's information given in the interviews about their experiences in virtual high schools. The use of the supplementary interviews and the other published information served as a form of triangulation to ensure that the themes were central to the participants (Creswell, 2007). Triangulation is discussed in further detail later in the chapter. Figure 3.3 provides an example of the construction of meaning and themes.

Quotes from Participants	Supplementary Interview Quotes	Relevant Artifacts
<p>JIELU: Um, I'm not very good at time management, and I don't know if that problem arose with my online school, I can't blame it on that alone but, the Internet is so enticing to me, and when I have that popped open it just makes me distracted</p> <p>RUTH: Um, I think it's ok for me because going to regular school was easy for me, and my classes at (School) were a lot harder it seemed like. I don't know if it was because I was teaching myself or the curriculum was harder, but um, so coming to college I was prepared to put in the extra work, so like the workload isn't scaring me as much, and I like being around this many people!</p> <p>KELLY: Um, it was really good. I feel like it was almost easier for me because I've already been in the real world, since I've done everything on my own. I've already taken classes at a college for a year now, so it's just like every other year pretty much.</p> <p>JP: with online schools I had to do my work and push myself, and in college no one pushes you but yourself, that's what I'm saying.</p> <p>LAURA: A Yes so in a sense it helped me because I already know how to read all the time and all you do is read in college so.</p>	<p>SAVANNAH: It's not too bad actually, last year I was a dual credit student, I took two classes, and it was actually fun...I liked being around people. I'm a people person, and I'm one of those who sits in the front and has their hand in the air the whole time, so it was fun. This year though, I have a full course load so it's a little busier, definitely have to use the time management skills, I think that's the best thing I learned. The time management, because college is very driven on you have the work in front of you, get it done or it's your problem.</p> <p>MERREL: No I don't think it is, it teaches a person to manage their time. It is a good learning experience.</p> <p>SAMUEL: Also, if you are in an online school, there is a misconception that you don't have the same education as those in public schools. I found in my case that I actually do better on tests and timed tests from doing online school.</p>	<p>Blog post written by online students regarding time management skills.</p> <p>YouTube video of recent graduates discussing their experiences in virtual high schools regarding time management.</p> <p>Second YouTube video of virtual high school students discussing their experiences in virtual high schools regarding time management.</p>
 <p>Time Management</p>		

Figure 3.3. Example of forming a cluster of meaning and theme.

After the first three steps, the analysis required making sense of the experiences by describing the structural and textural description. The structural description pertained to “how” the phenomenon was experienced by the participants, which related to how virtual high school graduates experienced their transition to postsecondary environments (Moustakas, 1994). The textural description pertains to “what” was experienced, which in this case related to writing a description of the meanings experienced in the transition (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions are located in Appendices H and I. After the analysis of the experience, a composite description was written, which encompassed the structural and textural descriptions (Creswell, 1998). This process involved first evaluating the single experiences, and then conducting intersubject analysis. This process was also achieved by identifying themes and narrowing them down to the essence of the experience (Cornett-DeVito & Worley, 2005). Other forms of data were evaluated along with member checks and an outside expert evaluating the transcripts in order to ensure trustworthiness. The essence of the experience was written, recognizing that a single unifying meaning existed among participants (Creswell, 1998).

Methodological Considerations

A limitation of this study was the lack of ability to generalize, due to the geographic and population limitations of the participants. The study was limited to virtual high school students in the South Carolina, and therefore cannot be generalized. The study was also composed of a small population sample due to data collection strategies, a purposive and convenience sample (Creswell, 1998). A convenience sample

was used because participants were not easily identified and the population of virtual high school graduates transitioning to postsecondary institutions was small. The nature of the research relied on the researcher to ask relevant meaningful questions and for the participants to give honest answers.

The relatively new nature of the virtual schools made identifying participants difficult. For the purposes of this study, participants were interviewed that enrolled fully for at least two years in a virtual high school, because those individuals would have been fully immersed in the virtual experience. One participant, however only attended the virtual high school for a year. Supplementary interviews were completed for three other participants who were not technically enrolled in a traditional postsecondary institution, but they were taking transfer credits at technical colleges. The researcher felt though, that the inclusion of the information would be beneficial to the study because of the small number of participants.

Another methodological consideration pertained to the ethics involving interviewing younger individuals. Several of the participants were under the age of eighteen, and IRB approval was gained to interview younger participants by sending their parents information letters. The researcher was committed to protecting the confidentiality of all participants and ensuring that participants did not experience negative feelings, such as distress during the investigation, as well as ensuring that each individual participant's parents were aware of the study and received information letters.

Finally, the nature of the analysis method was a methodological consideration. According to Creswell (1998) a phenomenological study may be challenging for several

reasons. The first reason is that researchers require a solid understanding of the philosophical roots involved with phenomenology. Second, participants must be limited to only those who have experienced the phenomenon. Additionally, the bracketing phase may be difficult because researchers must suspend their experiences in order to understand others. Finally, the researcher needs to make a decision regarding the introduction of his or her personal experiences in the study. In this study, steps were taken to understand the philosophical roots of phenomenology. Bracketing took place during the course of the study in order to ensure that the participant's experiences were understood while the researcher's did not interfere.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Shenton (2004) discussed several strategies that help ensure trustworthiness in qualitative studies to demonstrate rigor and relevancy. He stated that a) credibility, b) transferability, c) dependability and d) confirmability were steps that researchers could take in order to address various aspects of trustworthiness and credibility (Shenton, 2004).

This study systematically addressed the four issues to ensure that the findings were valid, reliable and objective. To ensure credibility, the research methods were well established and researched (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the researcher engaged in triangulation (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Triangulation involved utilizing various forms of data collection strategies to which complement each other as well as completing member checks and transcript checks (Shenton, 2004). In this research study, nine individuals were interviewed who were attending various postsecondary institutions.

Three individuals were interviewed who were attending technical colleges to evaluate any similarities or differences in the groups of people. Additionally, the researcher evaluated the available published information online, which related to the participants or their schools. Blog posts and YouTube videos that were posted by virtual schools that featured students who attended virtual high schools in South Carolina helped confirm the information that the participants provided.

Member checks were also conducted to ensure trustworthiness and that the researcher's interpretation of the experience was true to the participants (Shenton, 2004). During the follow-up interviews participants were asked if they agreed with the themes or if they had anything to add to them. Additionally, participants were asked to email the researcher with any other thoughts that may arise after the interview, this information was added to the data.

A qualitative researcher peer was consulted to add to the trustworthiness of the project (Shenton, 2004; Creswell, 2007). This peer was an expert in student transitions and was currently working as a university administrator in the field of new student programs. The peer was also well versed in qualitative methods. The peer evaluated the transcripts and determined that the emergent themes were similar to the themes that the researcher constructed.

To address transferability, a variety of participants were interviewed. As discussed above, the participants of the study attended a diverse group of postsecondary institutions including research institutions, liberal arts schools, private and public schools, women's colleges, and faith-based institutions (Shenton, 2004). Additionally, the

students interviewed had attended various virtual high schools. Thoroughly discussing the research methods and carrying them out in a strategic way addressed dependability. Confirmability was addressed by keeping research notes and bracketing notes throughout the research process. Finally, the researcher's beliefs and assumptions were established and limitations were addressed. The next section describes the pilot study and the changes made to the entire study. After the pilot study is described, the methods regarding the full study are described.

Pilot Study

The pilot study for the dissertation was implemented during the fall semester of 2011. The purpose of the pilot study was to inform the researcher, test the research design, and gain feedback from virtual high school graduates who had transitioned to a traditional brick-and-mortar college. The pilot study began by submitting the appropriate application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) forms, see Appendices A, B and C. Appendix A is the recruitment email that was sent to the possible participants. Appendix B is the interview protocol that was used in the interview process. One of the purposes of the pilot study was to refine and or expand the interview protocol. All issues and changes are noted in this section that pertain to the interview protocol.

Participants were selected purposefully. With the help of a student affairs administrator that works with admissions at the research institution, participants were selected. The students were chosen because of convenience of location. A search was conducted on the school database for students who had graduated from one of the four public virtual high schools in South Carolina: a) Palmetto State E-Cademy, b) Provost

Academy, c) SC Connections Academy or the d) SC Virtual Charter School. Once the students were identified, a recruitment email was sent to the students.

Findings

The Fall 2011 admissions director at a research institution reported that only 8 graduates of virtual high schools applied. Out of the eight applicants, only two students were admitted. Both students were sent emails, and one student completed the interview.

When asked about the transition experience, the participant stated that it was difficult being away from home but that connecting to students on campus helped. The participant said:

Um, I think, well for the most part I didn't think it was that hard. It was a little tough going from spending all of my time with my sisters at home and transitioning here. As far as the actual academics, um of course its harder, but I was taking mostly AP and dual enrollment classes anyway, so most of the work is a little bit harder, but the main difference is that you have to figure out how the professor is going to teach it. I guess that's more related to adjusting to college in general as opposed to being a virtual student.

The participant explained that there were issues related to the transition process, and that many of the issues experienced were similar to traditional students. In regards to motivation, the participant acknowledged that having taken online courses in high school may have helped with motivation. The participant went on to say:

I think a lot of people do get overwhelmed because in high school the parents and teachers push them, whereas in college you have to push yourself, but that wasn't

really a problem for me because doing the online classes you have to push yourself anyways. So I guess that wasn't really a big problem for me transitioning.

In regards to social transition, the participant had been involved with homeschooling before enrolling in the virtual high school. The social networks available to some homeschooled students are well established and provided the participant the opportunity to engage in many extracurricular activities. The participant did, however, acknowledge that the group of people that he/she was exposed to wasn't as diverse as the college community. When asked if there were any issues transitioning socially, the participant responded:

Dealing with the wide array of people that you encounter here. Most of the people I hung out with before were from the homeschool group, and we all kind of had the same outlook on everything and just going to a new place where there's people from all over the country, and all different beliefs and stuff like that.

The participant also relayed information that there is a perceived stigma associated with online education. When asked if the participant encountered issues when others asked about their high school, the participant stated:

Yeah, well usually I tell them I was homeschooled. And then say I was homeschooled but I took Internet classes because my mom didn't want to teach me the higher classes. I don't want to be like 'Oh, I went to South Carolina Connections Academy' and they say 'What the heck is that?' So I generally just tell them that I was homeschooled with Internet classes... Oh, I feel like they are

kind of judgy, they are like ‘Oh, you’re one of those people that doesn’t have any friends.’ And when you tell people that you’re homeschooled and take Internet classes they just peg you in that group of people that don’t have a social life (laughs). Either that or they say, ‘Oh you’re so lucky, you don’t have to do anything all day.’

Finally, when the participant was asked if they preferred online or face-to-face instruction, the participant indicated that he/she preferred some types of online classes. The participant also valued the face-to-face interaction with professors. The participant said:

It kind of depends, I mean like I love my professors. For math I definitely prefer a professor, because in high school I was never very good at math and needed help. But with English, it’s kind of like you read something and write a paper, that was really easy. But math subjects and science to an extent, but that wasn’t as bad because we had these things called live lessons where they taught on web cams. I definitely like having professors because I feel like it is a more personal relationship with them and you can go to them with questions and stuff.

Discussion

The findings from the first interview of the pilot study demonstrated some implications. The interview protocol was adequate in addressing the participant’s experience, without having to include additional probing questions. Individuals who graduate from virtual high schools come from a variety of backgrounds, therefore the

researcher noted that an adequate amount of participants would be needed to describe the transition experience in the full research study.

Additional questions were added to the study that addressed the perceived stigma that students experience in the transition. Virtual high schools are relatively new, and many traditional students may not fully understand them. The participant in the pilot study chose to tell others about being homeschooled with Internet courses, and still felt stigma attached to those courses. In conclusion, the first interview was successful in explaining the transition experience; however, more participants were needed for Fall semester in order to form a better understanding of the transition.

Full Study Participant Selection and Information

To continue the study, the IRB Amendment forms were filed to extend the length of the study and to include students from other universities (See Appendix D).

Participants included in the full study were recent graduates of one of the four virtual high schools in the state of SC: a) Palmetto State E-Cademy, b) Provost Academy, c) SC Connections Academy or d) The SC Virtual Charter School. The participants were in the transition phase (their first year) to a traditional brick-and-mortar postsecondary institution. Preferably, participants of the study had completed at least two years of their high school education in a virtual high school exclusively. Participants who had only taken elective courses or only spent one semester in a virtual high school were not included in the study. However, if a participant had completed one full year at a virtual high school, they were included because the availability of participants was limited. Only one participant had completed one year, the other eleven participants had at least

two years experience in a virtual high school. A summary of the descriptions of the participants is listed in Figure 3.4, and full descriptions are listed below. Three participants were interviewed for supplementary information but not included in the analysis because these participants were attending technical colleges at the time of the interview. Although the participants were not at a traditional college, they were interviewed to provide additional perspectives to aid in triangulation of the study. These participants are listed in the figure as well.

Participant identification began by an initial contact to a student affairs director in undergraduate admissions at a large, southeastern research university. The administrator identified participants and provided contact information. Once the participants were identified, a preliminary email was sent. The preliminary email included information about the study (See Appendix E). If the individual met the criteria, the participant was asked if they would voluntarily participate in a semi-structured interview. The participants were also asked if they could identify others who would be interested in participating in the study, and the email was sent to those participants as well.

During the participant selection process, it was observed that some of the available participants might be under the age of 18, and therefore a minor, because some of the students enrolled in virtual high schools in order to graduate early. An IRB Amendment requesting that the study be changed to include college students who were under the age of 18 was submitted and approved. The information letter sent to participants was changed to omit any information regarding age (See Appendix E). Another amendment was submitted to include a \$20 gift card incentive to participants

(See Appendix F). Two of the participants identified themselves as under the age of 18, therefore their parents were sent the permission form (See Appendix G).

Participant Profiles

Participants of the study were asked to describe themselves in several ways according to their educational experiences and other factors. Figure 3.4 lists a summary of the participants according to the information they provided. Additionally, in-depth descriptions of all participants are located after the table. All participants were given pseudonyms. They were asked to specify the pseudonym of their choice, or given one if they did not wish to specify. The participants were ensured confidentiality and that their statements could not be linked back to their previous high school or current college, therefore the high school was assigned a random letter: A, B, C, or D. The figure lists the participant of the interview, their pseudonym, age, high school attended, type of college/university, the student's self-described race or ethnic identity, the years they attended the virtual high school and their reason for attending the virtual high school.

Participant	Pseudo-nym	Age	Virtual High School	Type of College/University	Race/Ethnic Identity	Years at High School	Reason for Attending High School
A	Laura	18	A	public, southeastern, research	White	3	Health problems
B	Kelly	17	C	public, southeastern, research	White	2	Work and desire to get ahead
C	JP	18	A	public, southeastern, research	Black/African American	3	Wanted to try something new
D	Maria	18	C	private, southeastern, faith-based liberal arts	White	3	Lack of quality schools in the area
E	Jielu	18	D	public, southeastern, research	Japanese American	1	Parent stationed abroad
F	Savannah*	18	B	technical college, transferring to public liberal arts university in Fall 2013	White	4	Previously homeschooled
G	Ruth	17	C	public, southeastern, research	White	3	Bullying in middle school
H	Mortezza*	19	D	technical college transferring to public college in spring	Native American/Persian	2	Lack of quality schools in the area, homeschooled
I	Beth	19	D	public, southeastern, liberal arts	Caucasian	3.5	Safety and desire for personalized education
J	Samuel*	18	D	technical college	Caucasian /White	4	Previously homeschooled
K	Karima	18	D	private, faith-based, women's college	African American	2	Desire for more flexibility
L	Merrel	18	D	For-profit, campus of out-of-state university	White	2	Safety and lack of quality schools in the area

Figure 3.4. Participant profiles.

Below are the summary descriptions of the participants according to pseudonym. The participant's age, interest in the study, reason for choosing a virtual high school along with any other pertinent information was outlined. Quotations from the participants that described their experiences and reasons for choosing virtual high school will be outlined in greater detail in Chapter Four. Participants were described in the chronological order of the interviews.

Laura

Laura was eager to participate in the study, and stated that the information could help a lot of people. At the time of the interview, she was 18 years old, and she was pursuing a history degree at a public, southeastern research institution. Laura stated that her race or ethnic heritage was White and that she was living off campus. She chose the institution because she was raised in the area, and many of her friends attended the institution as well. When asked why she chose Virtual High School A, she stated that she had many health problems in high school, and it was easier to attend from home. The researcher did not seek additional information about her health issues because she seemed reluctant to specify the problem. She attended the virtual high school for three years, but remained active in her social group from her previous high school. During the interview, her answers were straight to the point, and she seemed confident in her transition to college.

Kelly

Kelly was interested in the study and stated that she did not know very many people who attended virtual high schools. Kelly stated that her race or ethnic heritage

was White and that she was living on campus. She decided to attend Virtual High School A because she wanted to graduate early and have the opportunity to work additional hours. Her previous public high school schedule kept her from working the hours that she needed. She enrolled in Virtual High School A for her second year of high school and graduated in 2 years, but also took dual enrollment courses at a local technical college during her third year. She graduated early and was 17 at the time of the study. Kelly continued to work during high school and kept the same job in college. She was raised in the area of her current postsecondary institution, which is a public, southeastern research institution. At the time of the study, she was pursuing a degree in bioengineering.

JP

JP was interested in the study, and stated that he did not know much information about virtual high school students. JP stated that his race or ethnic heritage was Black/African American and that he was living on campus. He attended High School B for three years because he wanted to try something new, and was previously enrolled in public schools. JP did not think that he would stay there all three years, but he liked it and decided to continue until graduation. He was 18 years old at the time of the study. He remained active in athletics during high school. At the time of the study, he was pursuing a degree in engineering at a public, southeastern research institution. Unlike the first two participants, he was not from the area, but he wanted to attend the school because of the academics. Additionally, he hoped to join the university track team.

Maria

Maria wanted to participate in the study because she had done previous interviews for local papers on attending virtual high school and enjoyed talking about her experiences. Maria stated that her race or ethnic heritage was White and that she was living off campus. She attended a faith-based private school through eighth grade. She did not wish to continue with private school, but thought that the high schools in the area lacked the quality education that she needed in order to succeed in college. Her parents went to an information session, and she began Virtual School C her first year of high school. Like Kelly, she also graduated high school in three years, as well as completed dual enrollment courses at a local technical college. She considered two options for college, but she decided to go to a private, faith-based liberal arts college that has a unique and discernable culture. She attended the college because it was close to home. Maria graduated high school in three years and began college at the age of 17, therefore she did not want to travel too far from home. Additionally, she wanted to keep her part-time job that she had in high school. At the time of the interview, she had just turned 18 years old and was pursuing her degree in early childhood education.

Jielu

Jielu was willing to participate in the research study to help general research efforts, but she was reluctant because she did not enjoy her experience at an online school. Jielu stated that her race or ethnic heritage was Japanese American and that she was living on campus. The researcher informed her that all of her opinions, good or bad, would be much appreciated, but it was understandable if she did not to participate. Once

she understood that the researcher valued all opinions, she was eager to participate in the interview. Jielu said that she had not been able to talk about her experience and was surprised that someone wanted to listen to her or even cared about it. Unlike the previous participants, she only attended Virtual High School D her fourth year of high school. Her father was stationed in Asia for a year, and Jielu had to move with her parents. She was faced with the possibility of graduating from high school a year late or graduating on time by attending Virtual School D. Although she did not enjoy her experience through the online school, she did graduate on time, and was she pursuing her food science degree at the time of the interview at a public, southeastern research institute. In the end, she was very happy to talk about her experiences because she felt that she never had the opportunity to express her concerns and her experiences.

Savannah

Savannah was also eager to participate in the study and had experience talking about virtual schooling because she had been featured on her high school's blog. Savannah stated that her race or ethnic heritage was White and that she was living off campus. Her mother homeschooled her throughout middle school, and she was hesitant to homeschool her through high school because she lacked proficiency in math and science. She heard about virtual schooling and investigated the curriculum to see if it would be a quality program for her daughter. Savannah's mother was impressed by the quality of the textbooks and also the connectedness of the students at Virtual High School B. This particular school had satellite campuses, and students could connect with others across the nation, which appealed to her mother. Savannah enrolled in the public virtual

high school, and stayed for four years. She also took dual enrollment classes her senior year of high school at a local technical college, where she was currently enrolled in a program to transfer to a public liberal arts institution. At the time of the study, she was 18 years old and pursuing a degree in English. Savannah also was working on her second novel. Although she was not technically in a traditional college at the time of the study, the researcher thought it would benefit the study to gain as much information as possible from this student to help triangulate the data. Also, the information that Savannah expressed served as a means to provide more depth into the topic and complement the experiences of students at traditional colleges and universities.

Ruth

Ruth was initially excited about the research topic, but she had trouble scheduling an interview because of conflicts. Ruth stated that her race or ethnic heritage was White and that she was living on campus. She was having a difficult time during her transition from Virtual High School C to a public, southeastern research institute because her roommate and roommate's friends did not treat her well. She was in the process of switching rooms because she was having such a turbulent time with her old roommate, but she liked her new roommate and was hopeful about the situation. Unfortunately, this was not the first time that Ruth encountered social difficulties. Her parents encouraged her to attend Virtual High School C because she was bullied constantly in middle school. The decision proved to be beneficial, and she thrived at Virtual High School C where she became engaged in many extracurricular activities including the yearbook and book club. Ruth was also the Valedictorian of her virtual high school class. She maintained face-to-

face friendships throughout high school, some of which have remained strong to her current postsecondary institution. Ruth graduated in three years and was 17 at the time of the study, and she was pursuing an engineering degree at a public research institution.

Mortezza

Mortezza's story is unique compared to the other participants in several ways. She was eager to participate in the study because she felt that her experiences could help others. She attended Virtual High School D for 2 years, but then decided not to graduate with the school and obtained her GED. She was 19 years old at the time of the study and completing her second year of course work at a technical college. Mortezza had been accepted to a public, southeastern liberal arts university for the spring semester of 2013. Although she did not technically graduate from Virtual High School D, she did have two full years of experience in virtual classrooms, therefore her information was collected as supplementary information to triangulate the study.

She attended Virtual High School D because she was previously homeschooled. The reason for her mother homeschooling her children consisted of three factors. First, her mother suffered verbal and physical assaults in public high schools and moved to a private Catholic high school where she no longer was assaulted. There were no private schools in the area, therefore she homeschooled all four of her daughters to keep them safe. Second, she read statistics about homeschooled children doing better on standardized test, and the mother felt that her children would obtain a better education at home. Third, Mortezza described her ethnic heritage as Native American and Persian, and she stated that homeschooling provided a way for her mother to educate her family

about nature, animals and Native American beliefs. Morteza began the virtual school because it was the first time something like that had been offered to homeschooled students, and wanted to try it. She had a difficult time in the virtual school. Her grades were lower than she expected and did not want them on her official academic record, so reluctantly she obtained her GED instead of high school diploma. Her transition to the technical college was difficult as well, but she persisted and was making good grades. At the time of the interview, she was pursuing her degree in the arts and was president of student government at a technical college and was living off campus.

Beth

Beth was referred to the study by her boyfriend, Samuel, who was also a virtual high school graduate. She was happy to participate in the interview. Beth began virtual high school halfway through her first year of high school because she did not feel safe at her school and also did not feel like she was getting enough attention from her teachers. At Virtual High School D, she had a positive experience and maintained friendships that had begun through her church and through the school. Many of Beth's friends were homeschooled; therefore Beth enjoyed working from home like them and was able to study with them during the day. At the time of the interview, she was attending a public, southeastern liberal arts college working towards a degree in elementary education. She was living on campus and experiencing a smooth transition after the initial shock of living on campus subsided. She was living on campus and stated that her race or ethnic heritage was White.

Samuel

Samuel was very interested in the study and stated that he had great experiences in Virtual High School D because it afforded him the flexibility to engage in extracurricular activities. He had been homeschooled all of his life and felt that the virtual high school allowed him to transition to college better. During his third and fourth year, he had earned 31 dual enrollment credits towards college and was attending a technical college, although he hoped to transfer to a public, southeastern research institute next year. At the time of the study, he was actively involved in many extracurricular activities while pursuing a biology degree. Additionally, he was taking an online course, a hybrid and three face-to-face classes, which he was enjoying. Samuel's information was included in the supplementary information of the study to triangulate the data, because although he was not attending a traditional four-year college, his transition information still allowed for a better understanding of the experience. He was living off campus and stated that his race or ethnic heritage was White.

Karima

Karima emailed the researcher because she had heard about the study from her friends and stated that she was eager to share her experiences. Unlike some of the participants, Karima had been in public school through her second year of high school. She decided to attend Virtual High School D because she was worried about the distractions of traditional high schools. She succeeded in the school, was able to attend the college of her choice where she was living on-campus and was doing well in classes. Karima had not decided on a major, but was thinking about either biochemistry or

education at a private women's college. She stated that she is a strong supporter of virtual education and educational choices for students, and she hoped to become an online teacher one day in order to help other students. She was living on campus at the time of the interview and stated that her race or ethnic heritage was African American.

Merrel

Merrel agreed to help with the study. He was somewhat eager and his answers were straight-forward. He chose Virtual High School D because the high school in his area was dangerous and lacked quality. After completing his second year in a local high school, he changed schools and was glad that he did, because he was constantly fearful for his safety. Merrel thought that virtual high school students were similar to traditional ones, and thought that his experience was not unique. He was living off-campus at the time of the interview and was working towards a degree in surgical technology at a for-profit, southeastern satellite campus of a large university and stated that his race or ethnic heritage was White.

Data Collection

The interviews were planned to take place face-to-face, if time and location permitted, but because almost all of the participants were located out of town or did not have time to meet face-to-face, many interviews were conducted via telephone. The first round of interviews was conducted in September of 2012 for the first 8 participants. Four additional participants (Beth, Samuel, Karima and Merrel) were located in late October. Each interview lasted from 10 minutes to 30 minutes. Because the participants were beginning the semester and had not completed many tests or projects, they were asked to

complete a follow-up interview in early November to describe any issues or changes that had occurred after the initial interview. The follow-up interviews consisted of asking participants to describe their transition experience again and to note any changes that occurred after the first round of interviews. Participants were also asked to note any issues or feelings that had arisen in between the interviews that related to their transition to college as virtual high school graduates (See Appendix G). Beth, Samuel, Karima and Merrel did not participate in follow-up interviews because they were interviewed in late October, but they were asked to email the researcher if any additional thoughts or feelings arose about their experience during the Fall semester. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed by the researcher, and analyzed according to the procedures described in this chapter. Results of the analysis are located in Chapter Four.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the research methods that were used in the study. The study was interpretivistic, and sought to form an understanding of virtual high school graduates' transition to traditional colleges. The data collection and analysis method involved the use of phenomenology, as stipulated by Moustakas (1994). Participants were identified through administrators in institutions of higher education, as well as each other. Participants were included in the study if they graduated from a virtual high school in South Carolina and who were currently in their first year of a traditional college. The pilot study lacked participants, but the first interview demonstrated that the interview protocol successfully aided in allowing the student to describe their transition process. Questions related to the possible stigma attached to virtual schooling were added to the

interview protocol. The researcher continued to seek additional participants to further validate the interview protocol and add to the understanding of the transition experience. All necessary IRB amendments were filed and approved. A total of 12 participants were interviewed during the course of the fall semester of 2012. The participants were currently enrolled in nine different colleges or universities. Two schools were large, Southeastern research institutions. Three were small, liberal arts colleges and three students were enrolled in technical colleges hoping to transfer to public research institutions. One school was a for-profit campus of an out-of-state university. Follow-up interviews were conducted with the first eight participants in order to assess any changes or new issues. Participants were additionally asked to email the researcher with any new thoughts or issues about their transition if they wished to do so. The following section, Chapter Four describes the findings and themes that arose during the interviews.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the research study. First, the chapter outlines the reasons that the study participants chose to enroll in virtual high schools. Then, the participants' experiences in the virtual high schools are described. The experiences serve as background information that scaffolds their experience transitioning to postsecondary institutions. Next, the study results are presented in the form of four themes that emerged through the analysis: a) Time Management, b) Learning Environment Preferences, c) Involvement, and d) Homeschooling Misconceptions. The themes Time Management and Learning Environment Preferences related to the academic transition of the virtual high school graduates. The themes Involvement and Homeschooling Misconceptions related to the social transition of the virtual high school graduates. Finally, the overarching essence is presented. The essence entitled, A Need for More Understanding and Support, was formed through the analysis of the themes and interviews.

Reasons for Choosing Virtual High Schools

The participants described many different reasons for attending virtual high schools. The reasons for attending virtual high schools impacted the participants' experiences and their transition to postsecondary institutions. Therefore, before the discussion of themes, the reasons for attending virtual high schools are outlined. Each participant's story was unique, and although there were some commonalities, their backgrounds differed substantially. The most common reason for choosing virtual

schools according to the participants was previous homeschooling. All three of the supplementary interview participants were previously homeschooled. Reasons for homeschooling and deciding on virtual schools can be complex, Morteza stated:

Well, I was homeschooled my whole life, I never went to any kind of school except for at home, and I started when I was 15 until I was 17, the online school. Mom decided to homeschool us for many reasons. It was kind of a mix of everything, our area wasn't really good, it had a bad reputation for schools. When she was younger she had a really bad time in schools, she got beat up in school plenty of times, she didn't want that to happen to us, she ended up going to a private Catholic school at church. They didn't have any here and she said if she couldn't put us in a safe environment like that she would teach us at home. She didn't want to take the chance of us being hurt in a regular school. She also thought that the kids learn more from being homeschooled, you know the statistics about kids being smarter and that kind of thing. She could help us out and make us smarter, and it was the uncommon education we needed. We learned about nature and animals.

Savannah's reasons for attending the virtual school were similar to Morteza. Her mother had investigated the curriculum and decided that Savannah could still have the flexibility of homeschooling with a challenging national curriculum. She explained:

Um, up to that point my mom had homeschooled me, since 5th grade, and she was a little worried about the high school transition, she wanted to make sure I got a good foundation because we always planned for me to go on to college. She

wanted to make sure that my math and science areas where she may not teach as well didn't lack. And she told me just to try it, do it for a couple of months, if you don't like it we'll go back to homeschooling. I ended up loving it and I stayed there my entire four years.

Finally, Samuel was homeschooled his entire life prior to attending the virtual school. Attending college was always one of his goals, and he believed that virtual schooling could help with his transition: "I was homeschooled up into 8th grade, and I chose to do online school as a transition to get used to going to a physical college."

Other participants expressed a lack of quality in the public schools where they lived as the reason for attending virtual schools. Unlike the previously homeschooled students, these participants had attended public and private schools before attending the virtual high schools. Maria had attended a private, Christian elementary and middle school before transitioning to a public high school. She stated:

Well, I grew up in Christian school, and I actually went to (School) from day care to eighth grade, I've never been to a public school before. The one in our area isn't the greatest honestly, and my parents thought that it wouldn't be a good idea for me to go there. We really didn't know what I was going to do so in 9th Grade I went to a Christian school in (hometown), so after that they were getting ready to close the school. My aunt had heard about (Virtual High School C), so I decided to give it a shot and sign up for it, so I really liked it and did it until I graduated.

Beth also did not believe that the schools in the area were good quality, and she did not feel safe in her environment. She stated:

Um, well I was there my I started there in my second half of 9th grade. The first semester of 9th grade I was in a normal public school, and um it was really big and I didn't feel like I was getting the attention that I needed to I decided to try online school and it was a lot better. I got more attention from the teachers and I felt safer. Basically, I felt safer in my home than in the public school.

When asked if she felt unsafe because of bullying or other issues she explained, "I felt wasn't that scared about danger, but not every kid there was going to the best kind of kid and I'm timid, shy and not really outgoing so that was hard for me I guess."

Merrel also stated that the schools in his area were not good quality. Like Maria, he also expressed safety concerns:

I went there because of the fact the schools around me weren't the best maintained. The teachers didn't care about the students, the classes were really big. I had to be worried about being stabbed or shot, not really somewhere I wanted to go. It was for safety reasons, learning purposes, many things.

The other reasons for choosing virtual high schools varied among the participants. Laura stated that health problems were her reason for choosing Virtual High School A: "I had quite a few health problems when I was in high school and it was just easier to go to school from home." JP said that there was not a particular reason for attending Virtual School High C, he explained, "I just wanted to try it, I wasn't planning on going all three years but I ended up liking it and just thought I might as well finish out." When asked to

explain further, he did not give direct answers as to why he wanted to try Virtual High School C.

Kelly was more direct in her answer. She explained that several reasons prompted her to enroll in Virtual High School A:

I wasn't happy in my high school, just typical high school stuff. I kinda wanted to get ahead and it was better for me to do online school. I worked too, so I did online high school and took dual enrollment classes. I've gone into college way far ahead and graduated early. So, it was a really good thing for me.

Jielu did not have much of a choice in attending Virtual High School D. Her father's job required him to move to Japan for one year. She debated her options and decided to enroll in Virtual School D so that she could graduate on time:

My dad was, he was transferred overseas to Japan, I had to be there at the time also. And so, you know I couldn't be at the home school, but I had to get the state requirements, because I don't speak Japanese very well.

Ruth did not have many choices as well. Her experience in middle school was difficult and her parents believed that the situation was causing more harm than good. She enrolled in Virtual School C with the help of her parents, Ruth stated:

I decided to go...well (laughs) my parents decided for me to go to (Virtual School C) um because my last year at middle school, because I was having a lot of issues. I wasn't happy and cried all the time, and so, it was more of a social thing. I needed to get out of the situation and so I went to (Virtual School C).

When asked if she was having issues with friends and with bullying, she replied, “Yes, it was really, really bad.”

Karima was doing well in her public high school but wanted a change. She realized that she would be taking more difficult classes and that Virtual High School D may allow her to focus more on her schoolwork and goal to attend college. She said:

Well, I went to a public school for the first two years, and I decided to go to online school for the last two years because I was taking a lot of hard math classes and science classes and I knew I would be able to focus more and study harder online. There are no distractions or anything like that and it’s a lot easier to focus than a public school.

The participants of the study expressed varied reasons for attending virtual high schools in South Carolina. Some participants attended virtual high schools because they were previously homeschooled and they or their parents wanted them to experience a more varied curriculum. Other participants stated that the rural schools in their area lacked quality and safety. Additionally, several participants expressed reasons that were unique to their situation, such as health issues, moving overseas, working, or even just wanting to try something new. The participants expressed unique reasons for enrolling in the schools, and their experiences in the schools were unique as well. These experiences in the virtual schools impacted their transition, and are discussed below.

Experience in Virtual Schools

The participants’ experiences in the virtual schools related to their transition in several ways. The educational foundations they gained in virtual high schools had direct

impacts on their academic experiences. Some participants went into a great detail about their experiences while others stated that it was the same as traditional high school, only online. The participants' experiences are described below according to the order of interview to provide context for the themes in relation to their transition to college.

Laura did not feel like virtual high school was an uncommon experience. She was one of the participants who felt like it was similar to traditional school, just a different format. Laura stated: "Yes I mean both of my parents are professors and they've taught a lot of online courses so I've been dealing with that for a long time so, I was familiar with the format with it." Kelly acknowledged that the experience can be difficult for some people. She compared other's experiences to her own. Although her experience went well, she also took courses at a technical college and worked. She said:

I've had friends that have done online high school. My class was double the graduating class last year. Some people can't handle it though, and they drop out because they can't. Like, if you make yourself busy and take dual enrollment classes it can be a really good thing. I didn't have any social issues because I stayed so busy working. A lot of people do though, it's a hard thing if you are working by yourself and doing online high school.

JP did not describe much about his experience, it was just going to high school online. He stated that he liked it, and that he had to learn to work on his own when he said: "with online schools I had to do my work and push myself, and in college no one pushes you but yourself."

Maria went into specific details about her experience in Virtual High School C. She described her extracurricular activities and other aspects about the school that she enjoyed:

I started there in 10th grade, it was when (Virtual School C) was first starting in South Carolina, they had a school in Colorado previously, and I think there were some in Georgia but I don't know if that ever got going. My first year, they supplied the computer and everything because it was so new, but I don't think they do that anymore, for the next classes. It was really fun, I'd say the teachers were what made it the best, it was really one on one, if you had questions you could like um email them and go to their tutoring sessions, you felt like you were the only student when there were all these others. Actually (Virtual High School C) had more opportunities than my school in 9th grade, the school I went to only had sports, they didn't have any leadership opportunities. At (Virtual High School C), I was president of the National Honor Society, I was in Peer Leaders Club, where you help students that are struggling with online classes, I was in Yearbook Club for all three years, which was challenging, because you have to work on the yearbook online, you have to have good communication, and not everyone sits in front of the camera, so I had to send out announcements. I was in so many different clubs, and I feel like I was more involved at (Virtual High School C) than my previous schooling. Peer leaders was through phone calls, they also have a research lab that's online, kind of like a video game where you

go online and create your person, and you walk around this virtual research lab and you can chat with other students online and stuff.

Jielu's experience was not as positive as Maria's. She had many problems with her courses, specifically due to technological issues. Jielu acknowledged that some of the issues might have been due to being in Japan while trying to take courses in the United States. She explained that she had difficulty paying attention in the online format as well: "It was, it was really different, as I said I didn't like it. The classes, obviously it is harder to maintain a schedule when it's not, when you are not physically present so it was all online."

Savannah however enjoyed her experience in the virtual high school. She discussed her experiences both academically and socially:

Yeah, it's definitely more self paced, you know but I did have the freedom, so math isn't my strong area, so I could work two weeks ahead, in something like history or English and have more time to devote to math. You have the option of how to work at your own pace, and a lot of the teachers are really helpful about you know stopping the work and giving you time to catch up. There is one main school, basically each state has it's each school, and it's run by state guidelines, but we have one big school, one national school, in Maryland, and they are like the home state basically. Classes, foreign languages, and a lot of the extracurricular ones are through them, so you can have people in different states in your classes. Also we have clubs and stuff, my first year I did newspaper and I met a lot of friends through that. In person unless I know you very well I tend to

be kind of quiet, but otherwise I mean my phone is in my hand 24/7, I live on my computer, my first year at the school, I got really into connecting with my friends. My mother would get on to me about my instant messenger being up all the time, she would complain about it binging all the time because of messages.

Ruth also enjoyed her time at Virtual School C. Similar to Savannah, she discussed her experiences with her teachers as well as with other students:

Well I definitely felt like I connected with my teachers a lot, I wasn't intimidated to ask them a question, which I was before at regular school. That was really good for me. I would get up and go for a run, eat breakfast and then do school, just you know chill out. I was in book club, history club, and civics club (laughs). we had online monthly meetings. Book club was my favorite because we would all be reading a book that emotionally we were attached to and then we would get to discuss it, you learn, I mean, even though you aren't sharing a classroom with them, you do have similarities with them. You know, a lot of people don't think that.

Mortezza's experience was similar to Jielu's. She had difficulties adjusting to the format and cited technological problems as her main concern. She stated:

Um, it was, well I don't want to talk bad about it because it was difficult. I started when it was really new, the programs didn't have all of the kinks worked out, so I ended up getting a lot of bad grades. My assignments wouldn't go through at all, I would do it, but my project to turn in online, it would be a zero because they would say it wasn't on time or they didn't get it at all, so that was a big problem

with me.

Beth, Samuel, Karima and Merrel all attended Virtual High School D. Their experiences were described similarly. Beth enjoyed her experience, both academically and socially. She explained:

Yeah, it was really great, a lot of my friends were homeschooled by their parents, so being in online school, I could hang out with them more. They were at home, I was at home, my school, all my classes were pretty small. My live classes with teachers, there were probably 10 to 15 kids in the class. All the teachers, we would email each other, if we had questions we would talk on a normal basis, all the material was really good, challenging. The teachers always made sure that we understood everything, that we were being challenged but that it wasn't too easy. It wasn't too hard.

Samuel enjoyed his time at Virtual High School D as well. Like Beth, he stayed connected with friends and made new ones at the high school. He stated:

I enjoyed it because it gave me a lot of flexibility with my schedule and so I had a lot of time to do extracurricular activities with church and other organizations and it also opened up opportunities for me to do dual enrollment courses during my Junior and Senior years. I did have some issues in my Sophomore year, getting behind in classes. It gives you a lot of freedom, and sometimes it was too much freedom. I was on academic probation at one point because of the issues I was having my Sophomore year.

When asked if he overcame his academic problems, Samuel stated that he did and graduated with a 3.5 GPA. He also said that he utilized his time to enroll in dual credit courses at a local technical college.

Karima was excited to talk about her experience in the virtual high school. Her experiences had been positive, and she maintained friendships as well as made new ones. Academically, the lack of distractions proved to help her and she did well in her courses. She explained:

I absolutely loved it, it was perfect, you are at home but you still feel like you can socialize with other students. You can see your teachers via webcam, they email you all the time so you don't feel isolated at home when you can't find anyone to help. The teachers are so nice and hand on and they wanted everyone to feel like they were together. We had homeroom just like you would have in public school and they ask you about your day and there are field trips. You never feel like you are at home on your own, you feel like you are in school but you are not. So I loved it, the teachers were amazing, the coursework was really good.

When asked if she could still keep up with the difficult academic classes, Karima stated, "I took one AP class, but I took honors English, physics and that's mainly why I went to online school. I passed both with really good grades and I knew I probably wouldn't have been able to if I went to public school."

Merrel was a participant who seemed to believe that virtual schooling is similar to traditional schooling. He described it as a choice, students have a choice to attend

courses and do the work in any school, regardless of format, although it can be difficult for some. Merrel stated:

Well everything went well, it was different, there was a lot of time in front of the computer. If you don't have the time to go into it, you shouldn't. It is a very self-driven learning style. I've seen several students go in thinking they can do it and just breeze by and then three weeks later they are gone because they are flunking out. It teaches a person to manage their time. It is a good learning experience.

Getting there, paying attention, taking notes. It's the same thing as an actual brick and mortar school but just a little different.

Each student described their experiences in the virtual high schools differently. Some participants, including Morteza and Jielu had some difficulties in the virtual high schools, mostly due to technological issues and time management problems. Most participants described their experiences as positive, both academically and socially. The participants seemed to value flexibility and involvement with friends the most. Additionally, some participants described their experience as similar to traditional students, although the format was different. The participants' experiences in high school set the foundation for the purpose of the investigation: to understand the transition of virtual high school graduates to college. The following section describes the students' academic transitions to college according to two themes that emerged from the interviews: time management and flexibility.

Academic Transition

The transition of virtual high school graduates to traditional postsecondary institutions was investigated according to academic and social transition. The methodological procedures used in forming clusters of meaning and identifying themes were described in Chapter Three. The researcher listed all significant statements related to academic transition. Two themes emerged related to the virtual high school graduate's transition to traditional colleges: a) Time Management and b) Learning Environment Preferences.

Figure 4.1 displays the emergence of themes below.

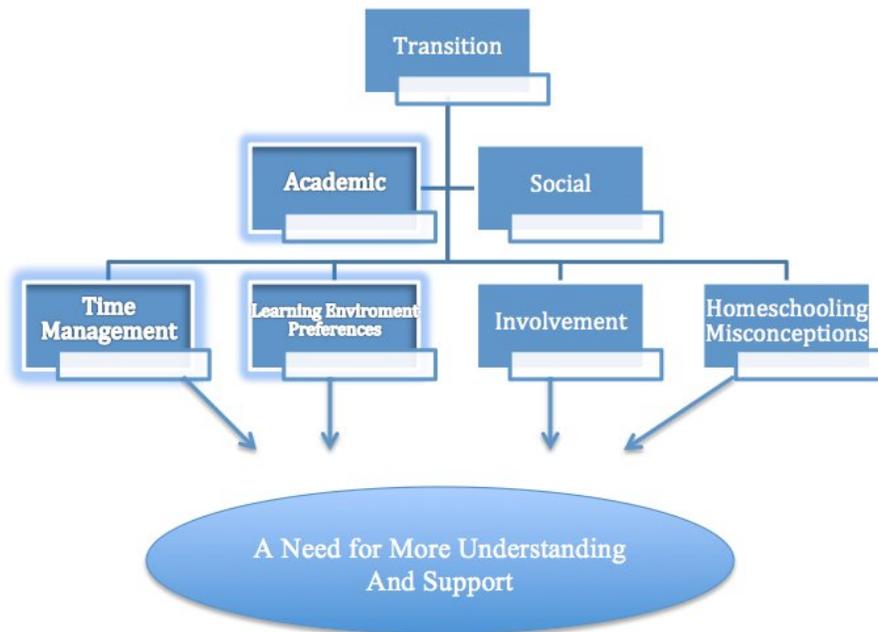


Figure 4.1: Emergence of transition themes with academic themes highlighted.

Time Management

Time management was discussed by many participants in different ways related to their transition to traditional postsecondary institutions. Most participants discussed

time management as skills that were learned through their virtual high schools that translated to their experiences in college. The participants were confident in their academic abilities and all were doing well in their classes according to the follow-up interviews.

Kelly believed that her transition had been easier compared to her friends. She had taken dual enrollment courses at a local technical college like some of the other participants. Kelly felt that this experience helped her get used to college scheduling and managing her time. She explained: “I feel like it was almost easier for me because I’ve already been in the real world, since I’ve done everything on my own. I’ve already taken classes at a college for a year now, so it’s just like every other year pretty much.” Kelly believed that she was ahead of many of her peers and stated that she had not encountered any academic issues while transitioning to college.

The participants explained in several ways that they had to learn to push themselves to succeed in high school, and that prepared them for college. JP stated: “With online schools I had to do my work and push myself, and in college no one pushes you but yourself.” JP’s attitude towards virtual high schools and college was not unique. Laura relayed a similar sentiment related to the workload of college by stating: “I would just say that the main thing is do your work, that’s the only thing. I don’t see how there is another secret to college besides doing the work.” She also went into greater detail related to time management. Laura stated that her transition was not very difficult because she had already learned to manage deadlines:

Yes I'm really good with deadlines and doing things that I'm told so it works for me to be in a classroom. It was just one of those things is that in online high school I know a lot of people just did not really get the whole "doing things on time" thing because the teachers constantly complain about it. I in a sense it helped me because I already know how to read all the time and all you do is read in college so.

Karima also felt that her experience in the virtual high school helped her learn to manage her time and do well in college. When comparing her previous classes to her college classes she said:

You have to know it, with the classes I had, they give you tests every day, every day you had a quiz for every thing. They did that I think so you wouldn't get lazy or procrastinate because you are at home, we were constantly taking tests and doing discussion board posts. We had to engage with everyone in the class and write long paragraphs of information. You turn on your webcam, the teachers asked us so many questions so you had to know, you can't just sit there. You have to be able to engage with everyone, and a week before you had to study.

Karima went on to provide additional details about her experience and how her virtual high school had actually helped her. She stated:

A lot of people would think that because you were at home a lot and not around people when you jump back into a setting like that you aren't going to be able to, it would take time to get used to, it was actually the complete opposite. Because you're at home all the time you have to find your own answers, you have to

engage with the teachers so when I went to school there wasn't that big of a difference. I was able to keep up with everyone and I was much more organized. My study habits were really good. At home you can organize your learning, so when I got to school, it was perfect. I knew exactly what to do.

Merrel stated that the academic transition was simple, and that there were not many differences when comparing high school to college:

I haven't had trouble transitioning. It's still going to school, I'm still on a schedule, granted this one is a little more defined and set out for you, but you are responsible for everything. Getting there, paying attention, taking notes. It's the same thing as an actual brick and mortar school but you had the choice to attend them or not, that is reflected in your grade.... it teaches a person to manage their time. It is a good learning experience.

Beth also went into detail about her experience transitioning to a traditional college. She had experienced some difficulties during the first week of college, but attributed that mostly to living on campus and away from home for the first time. She realized that she experienced some things in a similar way compared to traditional high school students, but that there were some differences. She explained:

The first week it was tough, it was hard but that was for everyone. One of the things that I realized that helped me, the live classes at online school, it wasn't like a normal public school where you have the schedule where you have this class and then this other one ten minutes later. The live classes at online school, you had physics at 9 and at 2 you would have a history class. That's how it is in

college, you have a class at 9 and a class at 2 and you know 4, that is the same thing. The fact that you have to be independent and sit yourself down to study for things, we did that in online school. You don't have teachers that are face-to-face every day telling you to study or checking your homework, you have to be able to work on your own in online school and in college.

Maria discussed the deadlines in college but in a different way. She was used to a more flexible kind of schedule at her virtual high school. At her college, everything was due at the same time. It had become difficult to manage her time and comply with due dates.

She explained:

The structure is good, but the deadlines are like, kind of hard to meet because everything is due at the same time, where at (Virtual High School C) you could like do it 24/7 whenever you wanted to and do more one day and less the next.

Whatever you feel like doing, just getting it done. Now with the deadlines I feel like I am, you know, trying to stay atop, but then everyone else is too.

Maria went on to discuss her issues with time management and how they related to her experience in virtual high school:

There aren't set deadlines except for every 3, 6, or 9 weeks, so in the meantime you can do as much or as little as you want. In college, they make those deadlines for you. So the similarities, are you have to be self disciplined in online school, you have to be self disciplined in college. I guess the difference is you don't get to make your own deadlines, that's the hardest part.

Jielu had experienced problems during her academic transition as well. She did not develop better time management skills during her experience in the virtual high school. The poor time management skills translated over to her transition to college. She said, when asked to describe her transition to college:

I'm not very good at time management, and I don't know if that problem arose with my online school, I can't blame it on that alone but, the Internet is so enticing to me, and when I have that popped open it just makes me distracted. I used to have good study skills but ever since Senior year things have gone downhill, maybe that's a general trend for college students, I don't know. I noticed that I'm way more distracted and I don't know why.

The supplementary interviews had similar themes that emerged. Savannah talked about her time management skills and how she has had to utilize them in her community college. She said: "This year though, I have a full course load so it's a little busier, definitely have to use the time management skills, I think that's the best thing I learned. The time management, because college is very driven on you have the work in front of you, get it done or it's your problem." Additionally, Samuel discussed time management related to test-taking skills. He stated:

If you are in an online school, there is a misconception that you don't have the same education as those in public schools. I found in my case that I actually do better on tests and timed tests from doing online school. Our tests weren't always in class, they were online and you had a certain time limit. You have to learn to take tests when you are constrained by time.

Samuel also discussed time management in regards to flexibility of virtual high schools. He believed that the flexibility in virtual high schools can help different types of students, and that colleges could benefit from some of the methods of instruction. He explained:

We aren't used to sitting in a seat for an hour or two hours depending on the length of time in a class or lab. It's something different in the case of online school where you have ADD or a learning disability, it doesn't impact you as much because you aren't constrained to sitting in a classroom for a certain amount of time. You don't have to pay attention to the lecture, because in online schooling you have the recorded lecture, lecture capture. You can go back and watch them later. Actually, I wish colleges had lecture capture, it is really beneficial because in online schools you aren't used to paying attention because you can go back and watch it later, so having that as a resource would help colleges.

The participants of the study discussed time management in relation to their transition to traditional colleges and universities, or to technical colleges. Key issues involving time management were related to drive and independence. Several of the participants stated that they had to learn to manage their time well because of the extra freedom that virtual high schools allow. Some of their peers had difficulties managing the freedom and had to drop out of virtual high schools. Merrel and Kelly discussed specific examples of friends who believed that virtual high schools would be easier but actually had a more difficult experience due to time management. Jielu and Morteza believed that the additional freedom made it difficult to manage their time. Jielu stated

that using the computer in virtual high schools or in college classes was difficult for her because there were many distractions. Overall though, most of the participants of the study learned time management skills through their experiences at the virtual high schools and used them to their advantage. Almost every participant believed that their experiences helped them and that their academic transition was going smoothly. The second theme that emerged regarding the academic transition was Learning Environment Preferences.

Learning Environment Preferences

In addition to issues related to time management and flexibility, the participants also discussed Learning Environment Preferences in relation to their academic transition. Some of the participants had been in the virtual high schools for over three years, and being back in the classroom was an integral part of the transition. Interestingly, most of the participants stated that they were happy to be back in the classroom, and they preferred the type of instruction. Each participant though had a distinct opinion related to classroom and learning preferences. Some participants preferred a certain type of class compared to another due to their learning styles, others enjoyed the atmosphere of the classroom, and several participants valued the immediate responses of teachers and peers in the classroom.

Laura discussed her academic experiences and said that she enjoyed being back in the classroom. She stated: “I actually prefer being in a classroom. I remember things better when I hear them compared to when I just read them.” JP stated in a straightforward manner that he preferred being in the classroom because of the engagement, “I

like being in the classroom better, I like seeing the professors and the students.” Ruth was enjoying her face-to-face classes, and did not have a preference, except for math. She believed that math was much easier to take face-to-face because she needed to see someone work out the problems in person.

Kelly discussed the format of the class as well and believed that there are distinct benefits regarding format. She explained:

I kind of prefer to have a teacher, but then again you can't work ahead. I really like that about online, I can just do all the work for the week and be done for the week. Having a teacher is nice too because if there is something you don't understand. I think hybrid may be the best thing because it is the best of both worlds. It depends on the class.

Maria stated that she debated if she should take online classes at her college. She researched online classes that were offered, but she decided to stay in face-to-face courses for the time being. She said:

(College) does offer online classes, I've heard a lot about it. I don't like the way they have it set up, so I wouldn't do it through (College). I really liked the way (high school) was set up, that's why I did it there. For college, I like face-to-face better. I really wanted...after three years of online high school and not seeing people every day, I kind of missed it. So I was ready for that in college.

Maria, did however discuss difficulties regarding face-to-face courses. She said: “I think the big difference is the lectures. I knew that I would have to get used to being in a classroom again.” Another time during the interview she stated that she did not like

sitting through lectures and would prefer to teach herself English and other subjects, but not math.

Jielu also missed the interaction, but had personal reasons for preferring face-to-face classes at the time of the interview. She had relayed sentiments regarding difficulties paying attention while on the computer previously and found that being in the classroom made it easier to pay attention. She stated:

That interaction is always fun, I didn't realize how much that I had missed it. I don't like online classes because when push comes to shove everyone, even I will open different links and not pay attention. I would zone out, they are talking to me and you can nod and say yes, but the online teachers have no way of checking to see if you are paying attention in the class. I'm sure I was skipping information, but when you are physically present, you can't talk...you can't text.

Merrel did not have many opinions about the types of format regarding classrooms. He did say that being in the classroom with a professor can make it easier to communicate at times. He explained:

Personally, I have no preference to being in a brick and mortar school or being on the computer, it's the same to me. If I had to choose I would choose face-to-face, it's a little easier to communicate when you are having an issue with a concept than online, because things can sometimes get garbled that way.

Beth was similar to Merrel in that she did not have strong opinions regarding classroom format. She did state that she was enjoying the atmosphere at college:

I like the face-to-face classes here at college. I wouldn't mind doing an online class again because I know how it works and they are flexible. I am really enjoying face-to-face classes. It's just a different atmosphere, being in the face-to-face with your teachers and students. Things like asking questions, you can still do that in online classes, you can do the same things, but it's just a different atmosphere.

Karima discussed her classroom preferences, and even though she was attending many face-to-face classes, she preferred online courses. Her experiences at the virtual high school were exceptional, and these experiences left her with a desire to become more involved with virtual schooling in the future. She explained:

I prefer an online education and if I become a teacher, I would love to teach at an online school. With an online education you are able to make your own rules in terms of studying and having a successful academic experience. I graduated with a high GPA and made really good grades because I was able to study whenever and wherever I wanted. I was also able to work two jobs and save money for college.

The supplementary interviews also revealed preferences regarding learning environment format. Morteza valued face-to-face and online formats depending on the situation, but at the time preferred face-to-face classes. She said:

I like face-to-face much better, but if I had to work full time I would definitely like the online classes better, because, being in technical college, I'm taking an online class, and it's pretty easy but as far as studying something, I think I would

appreciate it more being face-to-face with someone. I like asking my teachers a lot of questions, and um I come to them asking about the subject more and it's hard to do that online.

Savannah's opinions were somewhat similar to Morteza's, but she stated that she preferred being face-to-face for college courses. She stated:

For college I prefer being in person, because it's a little easier, like if you're in class and you don't understand something you can turn to somebody and ask if they go that. For high school, I preferred being online, I had a lot of freedom pretty much, you know, do what I needed when I needed, didn't have to stop and wait for a class. For high school it was fine, for college I can't imagine doing it because of the work.

Finally, Samuel was the only participant who was taking online, face-to-face, and hybrid courses. All other participants were only taking face-to-face classes at the time of the interview. Samuel believed that his experience in multiple classroom formats helped him in college. He explained:

The transition has been pretty good and easy actually. I chose to do one online class, one hybrid and three in person. It was beneficial for me to do the online high school. One of the classes I chose to take was only offered in an online format, and having experience with Blackboard and the online schooling actually helped me to transition into the class.

His opinions were similar to Beth's regarding interaction. Samuel stated:

Honestly, I prefer face-to-face, just because I like interpersonal interaction, and the online classes that are offered aren't as I guess personal because of the high school structure. The online classes don't have any type of lecture in college. I like it because I can actually see the teacher and ask questions more easily, I can communicate with my classmates more efficiently.

In summary, all participants discussed classroom preferences. The participants varied considerably related to their preferences. Many of the participants preferred face-to-face classes at the time of the interviews because they had missed the social interaction of the classroom setting in high school. Participants also acknowledged that although all teachers responded to emails quickly in the virtual high schools, they were enjoying being able to ask teachers or peers questions and gain immediate feedback. Some participants did not have distinct opinions about the classroom format, but they believed that each could be useful depending on personal situations and the subject matter.

Overall, the participants' academic transitions was smooth, without any major problems. The participants acknowledged that adjusting to life on campus was difficult, but that many students, regardless of their high school background, had issues leaving home. Most of the participants felt prepared for their college classes because they had to learn time management skills in high school, or had already taken dual enrollment courses. Additionally, participants discussed their preferences for the classroom in relation to their academic transition. Many participants had to adjust to being in large classes again, but they were enjoying the atmosphere and involvement. Additionally, the participants were open to taking a variety of course formats, but they were appreciating

the immediate feedback in the traditional face-to-face classrooms at the time of the interview. The participants' social transitions were smooth as well. The following section describes the social transition according to the two themes that emerged: Involvement and Homeschooling Misconceptions.

Social Transition

The social transition of virtual high school graduate participants in the research study was similar to their academic transition. Figure 4.2 below displays the emergence of themes with social themes highlighted.

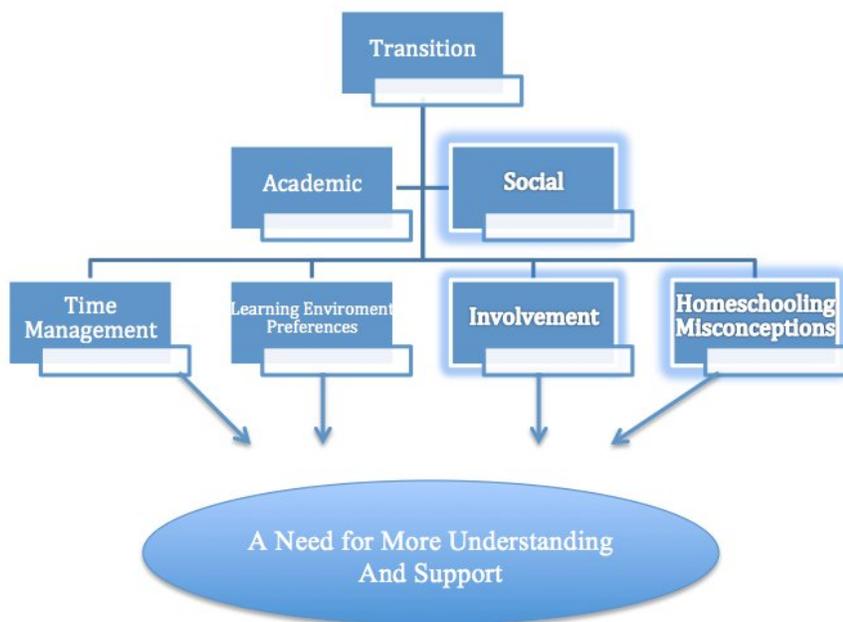


Figure 4.2: Emergence of transition themes with social themes highlighted.

For the most part, participants indicated no problems transitioning socially to their new environments. When a participant did indicate that there was an issue, it was typically due to the crowds or the large class sizes. Maria was having problems adjusting to the

large class sizes and missing the more personal interaction with instructors. She stated: “I don’t like class sizes, you know the big ones with 100 people. It’s hard to get used to. I was expecting it of course, but um I really miss the one on one because it was more like tutoring.” Laura also had trouble getting used to the crowds. She stated: “It’s been somewhat difficult, I don’t like crowds. Mostly getting used to crowds of people.”

Other than crowds, another issue arose when discussing the transition socially. Three of the four participants who graduated from high school early indicated that being younger than the rest of the college students impacted their choices and their transition. This particular issue was of specific importance to virtual high school graduates because many of them chose to enroll in virtual education in order to graduate early.

Ruth indicated that she felt behind in some regards because she graduated early. She explained: “I don’t know if I feel as prepared, as some because I graduated early, I went there from my Freshman year to Junior and I graduated, and a lot of the kids I’m in class with already took Calculus, and I haven’t so I have to work harder to memorize formulas, but I credit that to I graduated early.” Although this particular quote related more to academic issues, she also indicated that she felt overwhelmed in general, with issues related to her roommates and being away from home. Maria chose her school specifically because it was close to home and she could live with her parents while attending college. She felt that she was not ready to live away from her parents.

Morteza also indicated trouble transitioning socially during her supplementary interview. She went into detail about her particular problems, which related to being

young for college, coming from a sheltered environment, and also being from a different ethnic background than most of the students. Morteza explained:

That was a bit rough, because with the online school, you weren't around anyone, and before that I was only around my family. My community is in the middle of nowhere and so you don't really see anybody, so being around people every day at the tech college and the harder course work...it was tough socially, because I didn't want to talk to anybody and didn't know anybody.

Morteza was 17 when she began her courses at the technical college. She stated that she did not understand that she had to worry about other people and her safety. She said:

Well many of the online students progress faster and graduate earlier, so since I started college at 17, that was unique, I had to get permission slips to go to different places, so being younger, that affected it a lot. Actually when I was first starting, there was a man in my class and he was having a struggle in the class, and my teacher asked me to tutor him. I found out later, and I was so unaware socially, I didn't know about people, but I found out that he was a sex offender and he targeted young girls. So I steered clear of him, but everyone else was like, why would you talk to him, and so...I just didn't get it. It didn't register that I had to worry about anybody.

Finally, Morteza discussed her social issues related to her ethnic background:

Um it was a little bit, I mean my first year it was other girls would slam doors at me and make fun of me, I didn't know why. Maybe because I was the new girl. It was a little because people always ask me what I am, what are you racially.

They don't know what to call me, white or black or, I mean because I am Persian and Native American. They found out I am Persian and say you're a terrorist or something, and I would say no I'm not. So it was a little like that but not too much.

Overall, most participants did not have trouble with their social transition. The issues regarding crowds and being young compared to other students were discussed above, but did they not apply to enough students to be considered a theme. After engaging in horizontalization and forming clusters of meaning, two themes emerged that applied to the participants. When discussing their social transition, two themes emerged: a) Involvement and b) Homeschooling Misconceptions.

Involvement

The participants discussed involvement in several different ways that helped them have a smooth social transition to college. Keeping involved during high school and staying open to involvement during college was key to a successful transition and making friends. Even participants who had trouble with the academic transition indicated that their social transition was going smoothly. Participants explained that they kept in contact with their friends they had before the virtual high school, and they made new ones during high school. Keeping in contact with friends helped them feel connected, which in turn helped in their college transition. Kelly stated:

Just make sure you stay involved, I don't know, just be yourself. It's not a big deal, I think it's easier coming from an online school, because you've been in the real world. It wasn't a big difference for me, I've already had so much freedom

before. So coming here it's like the same old thing and a lot of kids come out of a really structured environment, and they have a hard time with it and go crazy in college.

Maria also talked about staying involved and keeping up with friends to be successful in virtual high schools. She said:

Don't seclude yourself from other people, even though you weren't around other students other day for high school. Try and meet other people and get to know them. For me I got to know everyone through online schooling really well, you have to put yourself out there because you don't have a social thing going on with other kids, it depends on the person.

Jielu also relayed similar information as she discussed her transition and how she would go about it differently. She stated:

The social transition has been the easiest part, I have a lot of friends from my old high school here and I am making new ones. But to others I would say always keep your doors open. Don't get closed in, because that's what I tended to do and I had shunned all interaction, and I kind of do regret that.

Karima discussed her transition socially and enjoyed her time living on campus and meeting new friends. She credited her smooth transition to being involved during high school. She explained:

In the online schools there were many field trips, I think twice a month and they would have trips where you would go to a restaurant or the zoo or park and even

go out of town. I think because I already went to public school on the weekends I would just hang out with my friends or do the fieldtrips with online school.

Finally, Beth also discussed similar strategies of keeping involved during high school which helped her later. When asked if she had encountered any issues transitioning, she stated:

Not really, it is, when you do online school, you are at home a lot and you don't get to socialize as much as kids at a public school, but I guess just making sure you're in a lot of extracurricular activities and still talking to friends. You just have to make sure you do a lot of stuff like that.

The supplementary interviews revealed similar information. Samuel was involved with many activities out of the home, and he said that he lived a fulfilling social life, which transitioned to college. He explained:

I have not encountered any social issues, doing the online school and also doing the extracurricular activities with church, the YMCA and modern woodman, it allowed me to have a good social experience during high school, so I didn't have any problems transitioning from online to an actual campus. Because you are online, you have a lot of time to organize opportunities to socialize, take the time and take advantage of the opportunities. Another thing I would suggest is dual enrollment classes, they are sometimes more beneficial than AP classes, and it gives you the opportunities to experience what a college classroom is like.

Savannah also discussed similar aspects of her social transition. She stated that her mother kept them busy with extracurricular activities including figure skating and clubs, so she never felt isolated. Savannah said:

I think that with the virtual school, people think like regular homeschooling, people think you have no social interaction, actually most of us tend to be more advanced. I have friends with jobs, I had a job, I was working during the week and weekends.

Overall, participants indicated that staying involved during high school was the key to a successful transition in college. Some participants chose to become involved with the virtual high school activities; others branched out and engaged in work, clubs or sports. Keeping up with friends that participants had before entering the virtual high schools also seemed to help in the transition, because some participants indicated that their old friends were attending the same college. In addition to the involvement theme, another theme emerged when participants discussed their social transition to college: Homeschooling Misconceptions.

Homeschooling Misconceptions

The pilot study revealed that some stigma might be directed towards virtual high school students due to their nontraditional educational background. Due to the findings in the pilot study, participants of the study were asked what they encountered in college when they told people that they attended virtual high schools. Many of the participants stated they had to explain to others that they were not homeschooled. Kelly stated that

her friends did not understand what she was doing when she began her virtual high school and that they equated it to homeschooling. She explained:

Why would you want to be alone? But now all of my friends are jealous because I've been really successful so far, and I've gotten really good scholarships.

Because I am so far ahead, I got all of that grief at first, but it was totally worth it.

If people ask me and I say I went to online high school, they automatically stereotype you and think you're a freak, but there are plenty of normal people.

Ruth was outspoken about being compared to a homeschooled student as well.

She began talking about people's perceptions of her and said:

Oh, I wish people understood it better. I hate it when people think I was homeschooled. I have to say, no I wasn't...no I'm not weird, I'm not a freak. I do have social skills. I'm so sick of it, I usually avoid the topic completely because it takes so long to explain.

Maria also stated that people believed that she was homeschooled. She did not appreciate people thinking that about her. When asked what people say at college when they find out she went to a virtual high school, she stated:

Yes, they like to call it homeschooling, which I don't like. It's not homeschooling, I have to tell them that. They'll ask me where I went to high school and it's sometimes kind of hard to say public charter online high school because I don't want them to think that it was easy, or that I was homeschooled. They usually don't understand. Sometimes it's hard to explain.

When asked why she didn't like to be associated with homeschooling Maria said, "I don't know, it's just different." She went into greater detail about her sentiments after thinking about the differences:

It's a lot different than homeschooling. I picture your mom or dad being your teacher and watching videos and being able to get school done in an hour a day and having the rest of the day free, and with online school, your parents aren't your teachers, you have teachers at the school. You work really hard, it was super hard, especially English. Like we have to write like 12 papers every 9 weeks, they were hard, they were at least 5 paragraphs and at the end of the year you have to do two research papers, which were 8-10 pages long.

Jielu said that at her college, she noticed people were also confused about her background. She stated:

When I tell them I can always tell their face changes a little. Maybe they don't know about it because it is a bit different and obscure, but several of the kids in my high school that I went to before, a lot of them got expelled from school and ended up going to online school, so when I told them I was going I did experience that. Some people were confused because you go to school in your home, I do have to clarify. No it's different but it is similar, your mother isn't teaching you, teachers are.

Karima believed there was a stigma related to virtual high schools, and it was due to misunderstanding. Like Maria, she had to explain to others that she went to an online public charter school. She stated:

There are so many different types of homeschool, and when you say online school people automatically think homeschool, it is pretty much like being in a public school but being at home. It's very organized. When I apply for jobs or college, I tell them I went to an online public charter school and that made a difference. They knew it wasn't me sitting at home with a bunch of books, when you say public charter they know it was structured.

Finally, Beth also experienced the same issues as her peers who participated in the study. Like the other participants, Beth received surprised and interested reactions from people at college. She explained:

When I tell my friends at college they are usually really interested, they want to know how I went to online schools, but I tell them that I had live classes with teachers, I did my work at home, they usually think it's pretty cool. Some of my friends even wish they did that... I have to explain to them that I had actual teachers, it wasn't my parents teaching me, I just stayed at home.

The supplementary interviews revealed similar information compared to the participants who were attending traditional colleges. Savannah stated that she was offended at times when people thought she was isolated at home all of the time. She said:

Yeah, I mean it's almost like homeschooling, they ask you do you do your homework in your pajamas? Honestly, I'm never home, it's homeschooling, but I'm on the go. I'm doing a million things and being at home isn't one of them. They think it's interesting, I mean, come on, we're in the 21st Century, going to school online is pretty cool.

Samuel discussed issues related to homeschooling. He also had to explain to peers about the ways that social interaction could work. Samuel stated:

I did have to explain to people that it wasn't homeschooling. I tell them I had state certified teachers and have separate classes instead of one homeschooling curriculum. I get a lot of surprised reactions because they don't understand how you actual have social interaction in an online medium. I explain that it is the same as how you interact with your friends on Facebook™, you can interact with them in an online medium but you also can create opportunities to interact outside and in groups.

Finally, Morteza stated that she needed to explain to people the differences in homeschooling and online schooling:

It's kind of mixed, sometimes people think homeschooling is online schooling or they think you go to a pubic school, sit in a lab and take your class. So you usually have to explain it more.

In summary, the virtual high school graduates did not encounter many social issues when transitioning to their respective postsecondary institutions. The only issues reported by participants of the study were related to getting used to the crowds and class sizes. They agreed though, that most participants that they knew had trouble with these issues as well.

The participants of the study credited staying involved in high school to their successful transitions. Being involved with extracurricular activities, attending social events, and maintaining friendships were noted to have a positive impact on both high

school and college social experiences. The participants also noted that when encountering people at their postsecondary institutions, they often had to explain the differences in homeschooling and virtual schooling. Although this did not negatively impact their transition to college, it does reveal that more understanding about virtual high school graduates is needed because there are many misconceptions about their chosen method of secondary education.

Overarching Essence

The overarching essence in phenomenological studies is related to the interconnectedness of the participants and themes that emerge from the interviews (Creswell, 2007). After analyzing the transcripts and themes, one unifying finding emerged: A need for more understanding and support. The participants mentioned in one way or another, both academically and socially, that more support and understanding was needed for this group of students. Figure 4.3 below illustrates quotes that supported the emergence of the overarching essence:

Quotes regarding support	Quotes regarding understanding
<p>JIELU: if they can go to a counselor or mentor, someone who understands them when they feel lonely or upset, the counselor could help the students get involved without singling them out. Being involved on campus helped me the most.</p> <p>SAMUEL: If there could be some organization like a club of students that were in online high school so that they could connect on campus to sort of have someone to communicate with that is familiar with online so there could be a mentorship with upperclassmen who help out incoming Freshmen and Sophomores that are still trying to get used to campus.</p> <p>KARIMA: The college set up academic advisors who call all the time to see how you are doing in college, and that definitely helped.</p> <p>MORTEZZA: So I was so lost, finally when I got to my second one, my teacher was very understanding once I told her my situation she sat down and explained everything and it helped me out a whole lot. After that I got it, and I could use it to my advantage, adding to what I knew already. If they had a transition, I don't want to say counselor, but someone to help you emotionally and mentally cope with the big change. Also, I think it would be a good idea to have tutors to meet in person and online.</p> <p>SAVANNAH: Having advisors in the high schools and colleges who can just help with the basic transition is important. I don't feel that I am that different from my friends who attended a brick and mortar school.</p>	<p>SAVANNAH: Definitely it would be helpful for colleges to understand that the number of virtual students is growing. So many people I talked with knew very little about my school other than it's name. I had to explain how it worked and everything about it.</p> <p>KARIMA: I think when I applied to some colleges, and say you went to online school they automatically think, they look down on it. It's nothing to look down on, it's actually a lot, it's more rigorous than public school because you are constantly having to keep up.</p> <p>SAMUEL: I think just having an awareness of online schooling and what actually occurs with online schooling would help colleges. A lot of times the teachers of classes don't fully grasp the idea of online high school. I did have to explain to people that it wasn't homeschooling. I tell them I had state certified teachers and have separate classes instead of one homeschooling curriculum.</p> <p>MERREL: I get a lot of surprised reactions because they don't understand how you actually have social interaction in an online medium</p> <p>SAVANNAH: Yeah, I mean it's almost like homeschooling, they ask you do you do your homework in your pajamas? Honestly, I'm never home, it's homeschooling, but I'm on the go. I'm doing a million things and being at home isn't one of them.</p> <p>BETH: When I tell my friends at college they are usually really interested, they want to know how I went to online schools, but I tell them that I had live classes with teachers</p> <p>JIELU: When I tell them I can always tell their face changes a little. Maybe they don't know about it because it is a bit different and obscure</p> <p>RUTH: Oh, I wish people understood it better. I hate it when people think I was homeschooled. I have to say, no I wasn't...no I'm not weird, I'm not a freak. I do have social skills. I'm so sick of it, I usually avoid the topic completely because it takes so long to explain</p>

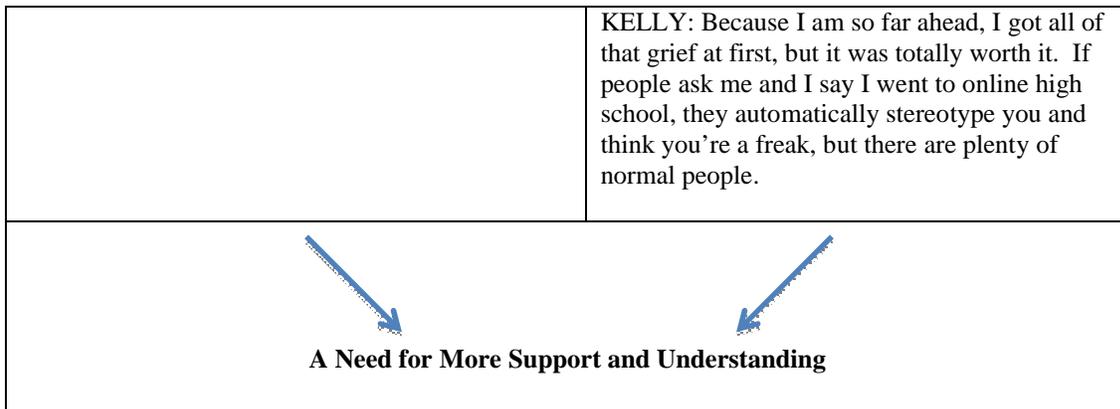


Figure 4.3: Supporting quotes for the emergence of the essence

Academically, participants did not report many problems, but they did express some concerns regarding class schedules and time management. Many participants stated that they missed the personal connections with teachers and peers in the online environment. Samuel's statement reflected the meaning of the overall essence. He stated that professors could learn more about virtual high school graduates: "I think just having an awareness of online schooling and what actually occurs with online schooling would help colleges. A lot of times the teachers of classes don't fully grasp the idea of online high school." Karima felt that the lack of understanding negatively impacted her college applications when she stated: "I think when I applied to some colleges, and say you went to online school they automatically think, they look down on it. It's nothing to look down on, it's actually a lot, it's more rigorous than public school because you are constantly having to keep up." Participants also had to explain their past to others in social situations.

Socially, participants discussed in detail the means to which they would go to explain their educational backgrounds and the differences in homeschooling and virtual education. All participants agreed that support for virtual high school graduates as they

transition to college would be helpful. Even participants who were transitioning very easily indicated that mentors or organizations could be helpful. Merrel stated that he was not having trouble with his transition, but that mentors and advisors would definitely help. Jielu said that having someone to talk to could help virtual high school graduates as they transition. She stated: “if they can go to a counselor or mentor, someone who understands them when they feel lonely or upset, the counselor could help the students get involved without singling them out. Being involved on campus helped me the most.” Samuel went into greater detail about this topic when he explained:

If there could be some organization like a club of students that were in online high school so that they could connect on campus to sort of have someone to communicate with that is familiar with online so there could be a mentorship with upperclassmen who help out incoming Freshmen and Sophomores that are still trying to get used to campus.

Karima indicated that mentor sessions and specialized orientations helped her transition. She explained that the college she was attending held gatherings before the semester started where she was connected with peers who helped her understand college. Karima felt that this type of program could be useful to all students, including virtual high school graduates. She said:

What my college did was when I applied to college, they sent out invitations to the school every three months where you would sit and have lunch with an actual student or you would sit in the classroom to see what it’s like, you would talk to people and see the campus. They talked to you about studying all the time, how

you were expected to develop study habits. In the orientation they had about six students that were freshman the year before and they gave us so much information about being able to socialize, and study. When I went to the orientations it got me in the mindset for college. The college set up academic advisors who call all the time to see how you are doing in college, and that definitely helped.

Mortezza also came up with the idea to have a mentor program for virtual high school graduates. Mortezza's statement reflected a need for understanding and support, both academically and socially for students. When asked if anything could be done at technical colleges to help students from nontraditional backgrounds, she stated:

They could have some kind of program. When I started English 101, I was behind and my teacher was unhappy. The topic was good on my first paper and the writing was good, but he wasn't happy because I didn't indent, he said I didn't double space. I didn't even know what an indent was, my English teacher online never explained it to me. So I was so lost, finally when I got to my second one, my teacher was very understanding once I told her my situation she sat down and explained everything and it helped me out a whole lot. After that I got it, and I could use it to my advantage, adding to what I knew already. If they had a transition, I don't want to say counselor, but someone to help you emotionally and mentally cope with the big change. Also, I think it would be a good idea to have tutors to meet in person and online. They could hire the good students to be tutors, and even helping study groups for the area where you can study with people and not be alone.

Some of the participants were not in a situation where they needed extra support, but they indicated that it would be helpful to others. Savannah expressed these sentiments when she said:

I think in public schools guidance counselors who are knowledgeable and helpful is the best thing to help with the transition. I was blessed with knowledgeable ones who made getting the information I needed possible. I didn't have a difficult transition and most people I know didn't either. Definitely it would be helpful for colleges to understand that the number of virtual students is growing. So many people I talked with knew very little about my school other than it's name. I had to explain how it worked and everything about it. Having advisors in the high schools and colleges who can just help with the basic transition is important. I don't feel that I am that different from my friends who attended a brick and mortar school.

The participants' quotes above related to each of the themes: a) Time Management, b) Learning Environment Preferences, c) Involvement and d) Homeschooling Misconceptions and come together to form the essence related to a need for more understanding and support. The participants came from unique backgrounds and had diverse reasons for choosing to attend virtual high schools. All participants indicated that there was a lack of understanding about their chosen method of secondary education. Searches on each of the participants' college websites demonstrated confirmed that there were no specific support mechanisms or groups for virtual high school graduates.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the findings of the research study. The goal of the study was to understand the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional postsecondary institutions. Additionally, the researcher sought to understand what academic and social issues virtual high school graduates encounter as they transition to brick-and-mortar postsecondary institutions. Four themes emerged from the interviews: a) Time Management, b) Involvement, c) Learning Environment Preferences and d) Homeschooling Misconceptions. These themes indicated that most participants of the study did not encounter trouble transitioning academically and socially. Participants related their past experiences and learning to manage time as helpful in their transition to college. Although most participants enjoyed their experiences in the virtual high school and online classes, they held diverse opinions about classroom preferences. Staying involved socially aided in their transitions. Most participants were making friends easily at the time of the interviews, but participants did indicate that many of their peers did not understand their educational backgrounds and equated them to homeschooling. Participants hoped that others could understand their backgrounds better, because according to their viewpoints, attending virtual high schools was very different compared to homeschooling.

The supporting comments related to the themes were evaluated for commonalities among each participant and for any bridging information across themes. The overarching essence, a need for more understanding and support was revealed through the analysis. Participants indicated in several ways that peers, the general public, professors and

administrators could form a better understanding of their backgrounds. Additionally, current students could benefit from support at colleges in the form of organizations or mentors who could aid in their transition from high school to college.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional postsecondary educational institutions. The study was qualitative and phenomenological in nature. Virtual high schools are growing in popularity throughout the United States, and as a result, more students are choosing to attend them before they move on to college. This group of students is unique, because their educational background is substantially different compared to students who graduate from traditional brick and mortar high schools.

This chapter discusses the findings of the study related to the theories addressed in Chapter Two. The main research question of the study was: What are the experiences of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional postsecondary environments? Supplementary questions related to any academic and social issues that virtual high school graduates encountered as they transitioned to traditional postsecondary environments. After the theoretical implications are addressed, the conclusions from the findings of the study are presented. Implications for policy and practice are outlined, as well as limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.

Discussion According to Theory

The theoretical framework of the study utilized the work of three theorists, Schlossberg (1981), Tinto (1988) and Astin (1994). This study aimed to form an

understanding of a particular group of students as they transition to traditional postsecondary institutions. The findings of the study are discussed below according to each theory. The findings are also discussed in relation to characteristics of the Millennial generation and distributed learning.

Schlossberg

Schlossberg's (1981) theory described transitions and strategies to aid in transitions. A transition can be a difficult process that requires individuals to utilize a variety of resources around them in order to adjust. Schlossberg (1981) stated that a transition is an event or nonevent that results in a change in behavior or relationships.

Characteristics of the transition are important in understanding issues that individuals may experience, as well as perceptions of the transition and the physical setting. Personal factors also are of importance when an individual is transitioning to a new environment. Successful transitions usually involve an individual utilizing resources including social and physical support systems. These systems can include family, friends, groups, or other resources (Schlossberg, 1981). Institutional supports can also aid in the transition process.

The participants of this study were experiencing successful transitions. Schlossberg (1981) stated that pre-transition characteristics are important for a successful transition. Participants of the study mentioned on several occasions the importance of taking dual enrollment courses at technical colleges. The participants worked to improve their education related to Schlossberg, Waters and Goodman's (1985) term *self* because students were conscious of their strengths and future. Taking pre-transition college

courses seemed to help students get into the mindset of college work, and understand the academic and social issues before the participants had to physically leave the security of home. Many participants mentioned that taking dual enrollment courses helped them bridge the gap between high school and college.

Post-transition success was mostly credited to parents and friends of the participants, and related to the term *support* (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Many of the participants mentioned their parents as being supportive of them during their transition. Additionally, participants mentioned various support mechanisms such as guidance counselors, teachers or peers at their former high schools as well as college instructors that helped in their transition. Additionally, all participants utilized many *strategies* to aid in their success including peer groups, advisors, and worked to become involved on campus (Schlossberg, et al., 1995).

The physical setting of the transitions was also mentioned in this study, and related to the term *situation* (Schlossberg et al., 1995). The participants chose their postsecondary institutions for certain reasons. Some of those reasons included being close to home, liking the area, or having many friends who were also attending the postsecondary institutions. Some participants mentioned that the crowds were difficult to navigate, but that they were aware of the issue before they began classes. Because the settings were chosen to fit the participants' specific needs, they were happy with the physical setting, and that aided in their transition process.

Tinto

Vincent Tinto (1988) discussed the transition of college students and the separation periods that they experience. He found that students transitioning to college often encountered stressors and difficult events that made success in college difficult. The first six weeks were crucial to a student's persistence in college. The likelihood of students persisting was increased when students integrated into the formal and informal academic setting of college as well as the formal and informal social realms of the school (Tinto, 1988). Participants did experience difficulties during the separation stage. Several participants noted that they were experiencing homesickness and had difficulty leaving their family.

The participants in this study were successful during the transition stage, which bridged the old and the new. The participants stated they were doing well in their courses. When they had academic problems, they had no issues discussing them with teachers or peers. All participants enjoyed interaction with their professors, thus demonstrating they had integrated into the formal and informal academic aspects of their respective postsecondary institutions. In the formal classroom environment, participants experienced productive discussions with peers and professors. In the informal environment of the campus, participants were getting along well with peers, professors and administrators.

The participants of the study also indicated that they were involved with formal extracurricular activities. Each participant stated that they had joined a professional organization, sport, or a religious group, demonstrating that they were making attempts to

integrate into their new environments (Tinto, 1988). Participants felt that these groups, as well as getting along with their roommates helped in their transition. The participants also mentioned that making and maintaining friendships was fairly easy, even though they were worried about the particular aspect of the transition. All participants were persisting in their academic efforts at the end of the semester, and had integrated into their new environments by utilizing the resources that Tinto (1988) discussed. Participants had made connections with professors and peers, and were also becoming actively involved in their residence halls or in at least one extracurricular group. Additionally, the participants were committed to their institutions, their education and community, strengthening the likelihood of success in college (Tinto, 1988).

Astin

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement is similar to Tinto's (1988) in that students must utilize a variety of resources to succeed in college. Student involvement was defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984, p. 518). Students who were involved in a variety of activities, both academic and social, tended to persist in college. Involvement can be measured on a continuum, and students who engage in a variety of quality activities, but not over engage, have a better college transition (Astin, 1984).

The participants of the study described both their academic and social issues regarding their transition. Many of the participants noted staying involved in high school and carrying this involvement through college helped in their transition. A major theme of the study was involvement. Participants credited involvement to helping them in both

the classroom and outside of the classroom when engaging with peers. Participants did note, however, that they were careful to not engage in too many activities during the first semester of college because they wanted to make sure their grades were not negatively impacted. Being involved in one or two social groups and having quality interaction with professors and peers aided in the transition of virtual high school graduates to college.

Millennial Generation and Distributed Learning

The participants of this study displayed Millennial characteristics in several ways. Millennial students valued technology, believed that it sets their generation apart, and preferred flexibility (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Junco & Mastrodicassa, 2007; Levine & Crueton, 1998). The participants of the study all valued flexibility in the classroom and their educational choices. The participants wanted to learn at their own pace and at times that were convenient for them. Many expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of flexibility in their college courses. The students also noted that the use of social media and technology helped them stay connected with friends, which was similar to the findings of Cummings, et al. (1996). Additionally, Elison et al. (2007) found that the use of Facebook™ and Twitter™ helped them make new friends as well as connect with old friends. Many participants of this particular study also mentioned Facebook™ as a tool that they used to improve their social transition.

Distributed learning is a form of education where students and professors can be distributed in location, location, or both (Neff & Whithaus, 2008). The participants of the study engaged in distributed learning through a variety of formats in their virtual high schools. These methods of instruction included synchronous and asynchronous

communication and instruction. Due to their diverse educational backgrounds, some participants became frustrated with traditional teaching methods. Dede (2011) stated that professors should be aware of different instructional tools and formats because students can benefit from them. Some participants echoed these sentiments when they stated that they would prefer their professors to utilize different forms of instruction. One participant stated that lecture capture would be particularly useful, so that students could review the lectures at their convenience. The participants did note, that they valued different forms of instruction depending on the type of course. Several participants stated that math courses were easiest in person, in lecture format with an instructor present. These participants also said that they valued online collaboration tools such as discussion boards and chats in courses such as English because individuals had the opportunities to express their thoughts and feelings without the pressure of a classroom. In summary, participants exhibited Millennial characteristics, they valued technology, diverse methods of instruction, and supported the findings in the literature related to these topics.

Conclusions

This study aimed to form an understanding of virtual high school graduates as they transition to traditional postsecondary institutions. Participants of the study included 12 individuals, each with a unique personal and educational background. The overall transition experience of the virtual high school graduates was positive.

Participants discussed their transition according to academic and social factors. The participants indicated that the academic transition was largely successful. Issues that participants noted included getting used to large class sizes, difficulties in communicating

with professors and navigating the campus. Participants stated their educational background helped their academic transition. JP stated: “With online schools I had to do my work and push myself, and in college no one pushes you but yourself.” Participants in virtual high schools needed to master time management skills because they were not sitting in a classroom every day with a teacher reminding them about deadlines and test dates. Participants of the study mentioned that they had to learn to work on their own in high school, and that college courses were no different. In many ways, participants felt ahead of their peers because they had already experienced the newfound freedom of not being in the classroom all day like their peers who attended traditional high schools. One particular participant stated that in high school he had the option to attend classes, and he also does in college, but he knew that if he wanted to make good grades he needed to make the effort to attend the classes.

Participants of the study also discussed their classroom preferences. Most of the participants stated that they preferred to be in face-to-face classrooms because they missed the social interaction of traditional schools. The participants did note that online courses were useful and they were open to taking online courses again. Beth stated:

I like the face-to-face classes here at college. I wouldn't mind doing an online class again because I know how it works and they are flexible. I am really enjoying face-to-face classes. It's just a different atmosphere, being in the face-to-face with your teachers and students.

Additionally, some participants discussed the pros and cons of each type of instruction, and they stated they preferred hybrid or distributed learning approaches. The

positive aspects of face-to-face classrooms that participants described were the interaction with professors and peers as well as instant feedback or answers to questions. The negative aspects of attending face-to-face classes were described as navigating the campus, the inability to replay lectures, having to physically get ready and walk or drive to the class, and sitting through lectures when they would prefer to watch them on a video or read for themselves.

The social aspects of the transition were also mostly positive for the virtual high school graduates in this study. Participants mentioned that in order to be successful in virtual high schools, one needed to stay involved socially so that the isolation did not impact their academic performance. Maria said:

Don't seclude yourself from other people, even though you weren't around other students other day for high school. Try and meet other people and get to know them. For me I got to know everyone through online schooling really well, you have to put yourself out there.

Many of the participants maintained friendships throughout their high school experience as well as made new friends. These friendships, along with school functions or extracurricular activities, helped the students stay connected. Participants also mentioned utilizing social media such as instant messaging or Facebook™ to connect with their classmates who at times were located in different states or even countries.

One special consideration for this particular group of participants was that many participants graduated early from high school and are young compared to traditional college students. One participant was 16 years old when she began college. The age

difference made it more difficult to transition socially for the students because they felt different than the other students. In addition, the younger participants were not ready to leave home.

Part of the social transition to postsecondary intuitions involved participants interacting with peers and talking about their virtual high schools. Participants often noted that most of their peers did not understand the concept of a virtual high school. A stigma was perceived when participants described their past educational experiences. The peers would wonder if the online courses were easy, and how it was even possible to go to school online. Many of the participants stated they had to explain their virtual high school was accredited, and state-accredited teachers, not their parents, taught them.

Karima stated:

There are so many different types of homeschool, and when you say online school people automatically think homeschool, it is pretty much like being in a public school but being at home. It's very organized. When I apply for jobs or college, I tell them I went to an online public charter school and that made a difference. Even participants who were previously homeschooled wanted their peers to understand that they were not homeschooled in high school. They did not appreciate the negative stereotypes that people associated with homeschooling.

In summary, the academic and social experiences of virtual high school graduates were mostly positive for all participants. Utilizing resources available through their institutions while maintaining or making new friendships positively impacted their transition to traditional postsecondary environments.

Implications for Theory and Practice

Changes in society and social policy have been occurring rapidly over the past century. As changes occurred in society, so did changes in education. Industrialization produced the need to form an education system where more individuals possessed specialized degrees compared to the previous agrarian economy. The information age has created a society where postsecondary education is a necessity for many individuals to find employment. Successful transitions throughout the educational system are especially important to assure that students transition from one milestone to another and continue to advance their educations (Krueger & Rainwater, 2003; Sacks, 2007; Pitre, 2011).

The notion of P-20 learning is acknowledging that one milestone in education leads to another. Krueger and Rainwater (2003) stated that the goal of P-20 education is “educators, policymakers, and administrators to think of education as one system of related, interdependent parts instead of several isolated sectors” (p. 3). The current educational system in the United States consists of three key sectors: a) preschool, b) K-12 and c) postsecondary education. These entities work independently of one another and often produce situations that are not beneficial to students. Examples of some issues include creating high school requirements that do not relate to college admissions (Krueger & Rainwater, 2003). An integrated educational system provides the means for students to link their education at all levels, thus giving students more opportunities to attend college if they so wish. An integrated system can be particularly useful for students who lack access to postsecondary institutions such as minority students

(Krueger & Rainwater, 2003; Sacks, 2007).

Early childhood learning, continuity within the entire school system and key successes in early K-12 education were related to admittance and successful transitions to college (Pitre, 2011). Opportunities for improvement and success were crucial for the success of all students, especially disadvantaged students (Sacks, 2007). The participants of this study were comprised of a unique group of students who had diverse reasons for choosing their method of secondary education. Many of the participants noted that professors and peers did not have a correct understanding of their educational backgrounds. Colleges and universities need to be aware that the group of virtual high school graduates is growing, and that these students may need specialized assistance as they enter college.

Access to postsecondary education is another consideration that is worth noting. The participants in this study successfully applied and were admitted to traditional postsecondary institutions, thus excluding virtual high school graduates who were not accepted. Virtual schooling is stigmatized in United States culture, and the participants of the study described some of the issues that they experienced (Glover, 2005; Pool, 2010). Many participants noted their college professors did not understand their method of secondary education, and that it was difficult applying to college because of the experience. Additionally, participants mentioned that some professors regarded virtual high schools as subpar compared to traditional high schools. A recent finding by Allen and Seamen (2013) validated this point. The researchers found that only 30% of chief

academic officers believe that their faculty members accept the value and legitimacy of online learning.

Forming an understanding of the different forms of distributed learning, virtual education, and new groups of students benefit students and educators alike. Virtual high school graduates have certain preferences and skills that they bring to the classroom. The interviews revealed that many participants felt that they had mastered time management and believed that some of their courses could be improved by integrating more diverse methods of instruction such as lecture capture. Participants also indicated that virtual high school graduates could benefit from several forms of assistance as they transition to college. Some participants mentioned that having a peer mentor to help in the first semester of college would be beneficial to them. Certain participants noted that having a professor or academic advisor who understood their educational backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses helped them at times when they were struggling with their coursework. One participant said that he would enjoy meeting with a group of people who had a similar educational background. Peer groups or organizations comprised of virtual high school graduates or even those interested in a variety of learning formats could also help the individuals.

Virtual high school graduates may require different student service strategies in order to ensure a successful transition period. These services directed towards virtual high school graduates could include, but are not limited to orientation, career and/or academic counseling information sessions.

Additional ideas for higher education professionals to explore include:

- Online orientation sessions
- Mentor or coaching programs
- Living-learning communities
- Flexible course format and delivery options
- Student organizations for virtual high school graduates
- Updated admissions policies that comprehend the format and rigor of various virtual high schools

Higher education professionals need to develop these services and programs in a variety of formats, in a variety of formats, both in-person and online to benefit students (Lowery, 2004). Hornak, Akweks and Jeffs (2010) identified student services such as specialized advising sessions, financial aid, and opportunities for students to meet others and become engaged at the university. For example, providing specialized advising and financial aid sessions for the virtual high school graduate could be developed as both synchronous and asynchronous sessions online thus allowing for interaction with professionals but also providing ways for students to access information anytime or as often as needed. In addition, higher education professionals need to create targeted opportunities for virtual high school graduates to meet other students and to become engaged in the college thus assisting these students in transitioning to a traditional college environment.

Higher education professionals may need to develop specialized strategies to assist in the transition of virtual high school graduates to the traditional college

environment. These professionals need to become more familiar with the virtual learning experience so they can more adequately design services and programs for virtual high school graduates. This familiarity needs to include an appreciation of the strengths and weaknesses of asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods of information so that purposeful services and programs can be developed. In addition, higher education professionals need to have an understanding of the virtual high school graduate's academic and social experiences when transitioning to college so that this student population's needs are met. These services have the potential to provide different outlets of information for students that are aimed at their generational upbringing and sophistication with technology.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, mostly related to the size and composition of the participant group. The research was conducted utilizing qualitative methods, which impacted the generalizability of the study. The first limitation related to the participants of the study. The group of participants that described their experiences for the study attended four virtual charter schools in the South Carolina. All participants attended colleges in the South Carolina as well. The geographic composition of the study therefore was limited in size and scope, and it did not include students outside of the state. More female students participated in the study compared to male students, which limited the demographic diversity of the participants, but the participants did state that they were from a variety of race/ethnic backgrounds. The researcher had limited experience with phenomenological research methods, as well as a vastly different

educational experience compared to the participants. Finally, another limitation related to a lack of prior research on the subject, making the theoretical framework difficult to construct.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could address the limitations of the study. The participants included in this research study were engaging in their first semester of college. Following the students through their college career would help form an understanding of their complete college experience. A study that interviewed students from a variety of virtual high schools in different geographic areas would be useful. Future studies comparing homeschooled students to other online students would be beneficial in expanding knowledge on this growing population. Additionally, interviewing students who attend a diverse group of colleges around the United States would aid in generalizability and help form a better understanding of different student's perspectives. Once a more thorough understanding of the students in different geographic areas is formed, larger groups of students could participate in surveys to validate the findings and to illuminate any new issues that virtual high school graduates experience as they transition to traditional colleges and universities.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the findings of the study related to the transition of virtual high school graduates as they transition to college. The findings were presented and related back to the literature that was described in Chapter Two. The students' transitions were discussed in relation to the works of Schlossberg (1981), Tinto (1988) and Astin

(1984), as well as research related to the Millennial Generation and distributed learning.

The general conclusions of the study were presented according to the themes that emerged in the study as well as the overarching essence, which related to a need for support and understanding. Implications for theory and practice were also described according to the findings of the study. Finally, the limitations and suggestions for future research were discussed in order to present ideas that would help advance knowledge pertaining to virtual high school graduates.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Email Used to Recruit Participants for the Pilot Study

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study at Clemson University

You are invited to participate in a research study of freshman conducted by Emily R. Green, under the supervision of Dr. Pam Havice, at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to interview recent graduates of virtual high schools in South Carolina who are freshmen at Clemson University. If you are 18 or over, graduated from either Palmetto State E-Cademy, Provost Academy, SC Connections Academy, or the SC Virtual Charter school, are in your first year of college and interested in participating in this study, please email Emily R. Green at erieste@clemson.edu. Your responses will be used to help form an understanding of virtual high school graduates experiences at Clemson University.

The amount of time required for your participation will be 30 minutes to 45 minutes for an individual interview. The interviews will be tape recorded. These taped interviews will be erased by February 10, 2011.

There are no known risks associated with this research.

There are no known benefits to you that would result from your participation in this research.

Your privacy and confidentiality are fully protected as no identifiers will be included in the analysis of the data. You may choose a pseudonym or one will be assigned for you upon your approval so that your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Emily Green at 864.934.4784 or Dr. Pam Havice at 864.656.5121. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol for Pilot Study

As a reminder, all information will be kept completely confidential, your name will appear as a pseudonym, and in no ways will your answers be linked to your identity or previous high school. Also, your participation is completely voluntary, and you may ask to stop the interview at any time.

To begin, I am going to ask a few background questions:

Age:

Major:

Living on or off campus:

Local resident?

I'm going to ask some background questions about your high school.

High school attended and graduated:

Years attended at the high school:

Reason for attending virtual high school:

Now, I'm going to ask you some questions about your experience transitioning from a virtual high school to college:

Please describe your transition experience to Clemson University:

Have you encountered any academic issues during the transition?

Have you encountered any social issues during the transition?

Were there any programs or support networks that helped in your transition?

What type of academic instruction do you prefer?

What type of social interaction do you prefer?

What advice would you give to virtual high school students about the transition experience to college?

As we are wrapping up the interview, is there anything else you would like to say about your transition to Clemson from the virtual high school?

Thank you for your participation, as a reminder, if there is anything you would like me to omit from the interview, or erase it entirely, please contact me at erieste@clemson.edu and I will do so.

Appendix C

IRB Approval Letter for Pilot Study

Dear Dr. Havice,

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 **November 4, 2011**, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as **Exempt** from continuing review under category **B2**, based on federal regulations 45 CFR 46. You may begin this study.

Please remember that the IRB will have to review all changes to this research protocol before initiation. You are obligated to report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. All team members are required to review the “Responsibilities of Principal Investigators” and the “Responsibilities of Research Team Members” available at <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html>.

We ask that you notify the ORC when your study is complete or if terminated. Please let us know if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Good luck with your study.

All the best,

Nalinee

Nalinee D. Patin
IRB Coordinator
Clemson University
Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Voice: (864) 656-0636
Fax: (864) 656-4475
E-mail: npatin@clemson.edu
Web site: <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/>

IRB E-mail: irb@clemson.edu

Appendix D

Email Used to Recruit Participants for the Study

Invitation to Participate in a Research Study at Clemson University

You are invited to participate in a research study of freshman conducted by Emily R. Green, under the supervision of Dr. Pam Havice, at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to interview recent graduates of virtual high schools in South Carolina who are freshman at Clemson University. If you graduated from Palmetto State ECademy, Provost Academy, SC Connections Academy, or the SC Virtual Charter School, are in your first year of college and interested in participating in this study, please email Emily R. Green at erieste@clemson.edu. Your responses will be used to help form an understanding of virtual high school graduates experiences at Clemson University. In this study, I will ask questions about your experiences in online and face-to-face classes, to gain an understanding of your learning preferences and to compare the methods of instruction. I am interested in learning about the perceived effectiveness of online versus traditional classrooms, as well as any academic or social issues that arise during your transition to college.

The amount of time required for your participation will be 30 minutes to 45 minutes for an individual interview. The interviews will be tape recorded. These taped interviews will be erased by December 10, 2013. Also, if you choose, a follow-up interview will be conducted in late October in order to gain more information about your transition and learning preferences. The follow-up interview should take no more than 15 minutes.

There are no known risks associated with this research.

There are no known benefits associated with this research.

Through your participation, you will have the choice between a \$20 Wal Mart or Barnes and Noble Gift Card.

Your privacy and confidentiality are fully protected as no identifiers will be included in the analysis of the data. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate and you may withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You will not be penalized in any way should you decide not to participate or to withdraw from this study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Emily Green at 864-934-4784 or Dr. Pam Havice at 864.656.5121. If you have

any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

Appendix E

Email Used to Inform Parent's about Child's Participation

Parent Permission Form
Clemson University

**Virtual High School Graduates: A Phenomenological Study Investigating
Transitions to Post Secondary Environments**

Your child is invited to participate in a research study of college freshmen conducted by Emily R. Green, under the supervision of Dr. Pam Havice, at Clemson University. The purpose of this research is to interview recent graduates of virtual high schools in South Carolina who are freshmen. Students who graduated from Palmetto State ECademy, Provost Academy, SC Connections Academy, or the SC Virtual Charter School, and are in their first year of college will be included in the study.

The responses will be used to help form an understanding of virtual high school graduates experiences at college. In this study, I will ask questions about their experiences in online and face-to-face classes, to gain an understanding of the student's learning preferences and to compare the methods of instruction. Also, I am interested in learning about the perceived effectiveness of online versus traditional classrooms.

Your child's part in this study will be to discuss their transition experience from a fully online school to a traditional college.

It will take your child about 30 minutes to take part in this study, and about 10-15 minutes to take part in the follow-up interview. The interviews will be tape recorded. These taped interviews will be erased by December 10, 2013.

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to your child in this research study that we might expect your child to go through if they take part in this research.

We do not know of any way your child would benefit directly from taking part in this study.

A \$20 gift card to WalMart or Barnes and Noble will be given to your child for participating in the study.

Your child's privacy and confidentiality are fully protected as no identifiers will be included in the analysis of the data. Your child's identity will not be revealed in any publication that might result from this study. We will not disclose to anyone outside of

the research team that your child was in this study or what information we collected about your child in particular.

Your child does not have to participate in this research study. You do not have to let your child be in the study. You may tell us at any time that you do not want your child to be in the study anymore. Your child will not be punished in any way if you decide not to let your child be in the study or if you stop your child from continuing in the study.

We will also ask your child if they want to take part in this study. Your child will be able to refuse to take part or to quit participating in the study at any time.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Emily Green at 864-934-4784 or Dr. Pam Havice at 864.656.5121. If you have any questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research participant, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance at 864.656.6460.

A copy of this form will be given to you.

Appendix F

IRB Approval Letters for Study Amendments

Dear Dr. Havice,

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 **November 4, 2011**, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as **Exempt** from continuing review under category **B2**, based on federal regulations 45 CFR 46. You may begin this study.

Please remember that the IRB will have to review all changes to this research protocol before initiation. You are obligated to report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. All team members are required to review the “Responsibilities of Principal Investigators” and the “Responsibilities of Research Team Members” available at <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/regulations.html>.

We ask that you notify the ORC when your study is complete or if terminated. Please let us know if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

Good luck with your study.

All the best,
Nalinee

Nalinee D. Patin
IRB Coordinator
Clemson University
Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Voice: (864) 656-0636
Fax: (864) 656-4475
E-mail: npatin@clemson.edu
Web site: <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/>
IRB E-mail: irb@clemson.edu

Dear Dr. Havice,

The chair of the Clemson University Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed your

amendment request and a determination was made on September 19, 2012, that the proposed activities involving human participants qualify as Exempt from continuing review under category **B1**, based on federal regulations 45 CFR 46. You may begin to implement this amendment. IRB #2011-371.

There were a few typos on the consent documents. Please review the tracked changes on the attached documents and make the necessary changes to your documents before distribution.

Please remember that no change in this research protocol can be initiated without prior review by the IRB. You must report any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects, complications, and/or any adverse events to the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) immediately. We also ask that you notify the ORC when your study is completed or terminated. Please let us know if you have any questions and use the IRB number and title in all communications regarding this study.

All the best,

Nalinee

Nalinee D. Patin

IRB Coordinator

Clemson University

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Voice: (864) 656-0636

Fax: (864) 656-4475

E-mail: npatin@clermson.edu

Web site: <http://www.clemson.edu/research/compliance/irb/>

IRB E-mail: irb@clermson.edu

Appendix G

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

As a reminder, all information will be kept completely confidential, your name will appear as a pseudonym, and in no ways will your answers be linked to your identity or previous high school. Also, your participation is completely voluntary, and you may ask to stop the interview at any time.

To begin, I am going to ask a few background questions:

Age:

Major:

Living on or off campus:

Local resident?

I'm going to ask some background questions about your high school.

High school attended and graduated:

Years attended at the high school:

Reason for attending virtual high school:

Now, I'm going to ask you some questions about your experience transitioning from a virtual high school to college:

Please describe your transition experience to Clemson University:

Have you encountered any academic issues during the transition?

Have you encountered any social issues during the transition?

Were there any programs or support networks that helped in your transition?

What type of academic instruction do you prefer?

What type of social interaction do you prefer?

What advice would you give to virtual high school students about the transition experience to college?

Have you noticed any stigma related to being a virtual high school graduate?

As we are wrapping up the interview, is there anything else you would like to say about your transition to Clemson from the virtual high school?

Thank you for your participation, as a reminder, if there is anything you would like me to omit from the interview, or erase it entirely, please contact me at erieste@clemson.edu and I will do so.

Follow-Up Questions:

Please describe your experience transitioning again.

Have you noticed any changes since the first interview?

Have you encountered any new academic or social issues?

Appendix H

Textural Description

The participants described their transition experience according to their educational backgrounds and how it impacted them at their current intuitions. Participants reported a variety of experiences when asked about their transition to postsecondary institutions. Some participants were straight to the point when asked about their transition, and felt that college was not very different compared to high school because they had already been on their own in a sense. Others went into greater detail about specific aspects of their lives.

Those who were having difficult transitions mentioned issues related to crowds, being around so many people and getting used to different formats:

LAURA: It's been somewhat difficult, I don't like crowds. Mostly getting used to crowds of people, the classes are easy though.

MORTEZZA: That was a bit rough, because with the online school, you weren't around anyone, and before that I was only around my family. My community is in the middle of nowhere and so you don't really see anybody, so being around people every day at the tech college and the harder course work...it was tough socially, because I didn't want to talk to anybody and didn't know anybody and the workload was a bit of a challenge. I started in the basic classes, and I made A's in everything, I learn fast and in the first couple of weeks or month were tough, but I did catch up since I hadn't been to regular school. It's almost like I had a harder time than the others, but I started making A's in everything, and I've got a 3.8 GPA now.

BETH: Um, it's been, I'm guessing it's rough for everyone living on campus. The first week it was tough, it was hard but that was for everyone. One of the things that I realized that helped me, the live classes at online school, it wasn't like a normal public school where you have the schedule where you have this class and then this other one ten minutes later. The live classes at online school, you had physics at 9 and at 2 you would have a history class. That's how it is in college, you have a class at 9 and a class at 2 and you know 4, that is the same thing. The fact that you have to be independent and sit yourself down to study for things, we did that in online school. You don't have teachers

that are face-to-face every day telling you to study or checking your homework, you have to be able to work on your own in online school and in college.

MARIA: Um, I don't like class sizes, you know the big ones with 100 people. It's hard to get used to. I was expecting it of course, but um I really miss the one on one because it was more like tutoring, you do it yourself but the teacher is always there and will answer within hours. With college, you have to go to their office when they have office hours, which is like one hour a day, and you have to work it into your schedule and walk forever across campus. So it is a lot more tiring, a lot more challenging.

Other students described a trouble-free transition. Many students described their transition as being easy because of dual enrollment courses or other experiences that helped them transition to college:

JP: It's been a pretty good transition, I like it here

KELLY: Um, it was really good. I feel like it was almost easier for me because I've already been in the real world, since I've done everything on my own. I've already taken classes at a college for a year now, so it's just like every other year pretty much. Making friends and stuff has been pretty easy, it's really good. Like, there's other things I didn't do, since I didn't go to a public high school, but overall I think it was better for me. A lot of kids it's a really easy way to get distracted, so you have to be really focused.

JIELU: It's been really great, I thought I would have more trouble making friends. That was honestly my first concern but it's been trouble free.

SAVANNAH: It's not too bad actually, last year I was a dual credit student, I took two classes, and it was actually fun...I liked being around people. I'm a people person, and I'm one of those who sits in the front and has their hand in the air the whole time, so it was fun. This year though, I have a full course load so it's a little busier, definitely have to use the time management skills, I think that's the best thing I learned. The time management, because college is very driven on you have the work in front of you, get it done or it's your problem.

RUTH: Um, I think it's ok for me because going to regular school was easy for me, and my classes at (School) were a lot harder it seemed like. I don't know if it was because I was teaching myself or the curriculum was harder, but um, so coming to college I was prepared to put in the extra work, so like the workload isn't scaring me as much, and I like being around this many people!

KARIMA: Its good. A lot of people would think that because you were at home a lot and not around people when you jump back into a setting like that you aren't going to be able

to, it would take time to get used to, it was actually the complete opposite. Because you're at home all the time you have to find your own answers, you have to engage with the teachers so when I went to school there wasn't that big of a difference. I was able to keep up with everyone and I was much more organized. My study habits were really good. At home you can organize your learning, so when I got to school, it was perfect. I knew exactly what to do.

SAMUEL: The transition has been pretty good and easy actually. I chose to do one online class, one hybrid and three in person. It was beneficial for me to do the online high school. One of the classes I chose to take was only offered in an online format, and having experience with Blackboard and the online schooling actually helped me to transition into the class.

MERREL: I haven't had trouble transitioning. It's still going to school, I'm still on a schedule, granted this one is a little more defined and set out for you, but you are responsible for everything. Getting there, paying attention, taking notes. It's the same thing as an actual brick and mortar school.

The students expressed their transition in their own words and mentioned both academic and social issues. Largely, the participants described their transitions as easier than they expected. Students who did have issues during their transition, academic or social, still noted that they were doing well in classes and that they simply had to adjust.

Appendix I

Structural Description

“How” the students experienced their transition varied in many ways but all students noted that they experienced a lack of understanding or support. The phenomenon of the transition from virtual high school to college was described in academic and social ways. The students often mentioned their classes, professors and social lives in interconnected ways. Student’s backgrounds influenced their choices for high school and college. The students identified unique characteristics as virtual high school graduates that set them apart from other students transitioning.

As virtual high school graduates, the participants indicated that they were used to different types of schedules and had to manage their time and social lives with purpose. Once they transitioned to college they experienced similar issues as well as unique ones to themselves. Laura’s transition went well, but she was still experiencing health problems. She felt that her time in the online classrooms was helping her at college. Kelly’s transition went smoothly and she believed her transition was actually easier compared to other students and peers. She credited this to being in the real world. JP’s transition was also going well, and his comments echoed Kelly’s. Maria’s transition was somewhat different, because she was not living on campus. She was living at home and working, she experienced the multiple demands of her home, social, work and college lives, but felt prepared because of her educational background and time management skills. Jielu was having a great time at her college, even in the follow-up interview she was upbeat and positive even though she did not enjoy her last year of high school. She

was enjoying a rich social life and was involved with several organizations on campus which helped her make new friends. Savannah was doing well at her technical college and stated that her transition was easy. She credited taking dual enrollment courses as well as having a large groups of friends who were located near her as well as all around the country. Ruth was experiencing social issues due to conflicts with her first roommate. Once she moved rooms, her transition went better, and she was enjoying her classes. Morteza had a difficult transition, but once she obtained help of teachers and made friends she became involved and was making good grades. She admitted that she needed to learn more about the world and that her sheltered environment made the transition difficult, but that she was enjoying her time in college. Samuel was enjoying his time at the technical college as well. He also stated that dual enrollment courses assisted him in his transition. His social life was rich, where he was engaged in playing music, carpentry, sports and academic groups, and was doing well in his classes. Beth had some trouble transitioning because she wasn't used to living away from home and being on campus. She said everyone around her felt the same way, but that she was having a great time in college. Beth was doing well in her courses and was actively involved with a Christian group on campus where she would engage in community service activities. This group has helped her make new friends. Karima stated that she was doing excellent at her college, she was enjoying all of her classes and taking her time to choose a major. Her roommate and all of her friends got along well. Merrel was enjoying a trouble-free transition. He lived off campus and believed that his life was not very different compared to high school because he also took dual enrollment courses.

A lack of understanding pertaining to their previous education was discussed by the participants. Many of the participants felt that they had to justify their past educational experiences and explain them to others in order to feel understood. The participants all discussed time management, classroom and learning preferences, keeping involved and making new friends, as well as explaining their backgrounds.

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