Chapter 11
Identifying Online Graduate Learners' Perceived Barriers to Their Academic Success:
A Modified Delphi Study

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ABSTRACT

Online graduate students ages 25 and older have unique challenges toward achieving their academic goals as compared to younger learners, as they often already have families, careers, and other demands on their time. Pursuing advanced degrees is typically related to gaining a competitive edge or to completely changing careers. Learning barriers often include the lack of accommodations for these learners' unique needs and educational preferences. The purpose of this modified Delphi study was to identify these nontraditional online graduate learners' perceived barriers to their learning, along with relevant strategies to decrease those barriers. Sharing this study's results should facilitate these learners' success and increase retention in their respective universities as more non-traditional learners graduate. The study data obtained from the participants included these learners' personal accounts of their own learning needs and preferences, their perceived learning barriers, their anticipated real-world application for their education, and their expectations for program completion.

INTRODUCTION

Educational research indicates non-traditional students ages 25 and above faced numerous barriers that impeded their progress toward achievement of their academic and career goals, which in turn affected retention of these students in their graduate programs (Aversa & MacCall, 2013; Kilburn, Kilburn, & Cates, 2014; Nandeshwar, Menzies, & Nelson, 2011). These adult online students also had specific needs and preferred significant learning experiences and engaging interactive lessons (Abdelaziz, 2013; Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014). Graduate level online learners ages 25 and above did not want to simply read

text or be passive recipients listening to instructors' lectures (Joyner, Fuller, Holzweiss, Henderson, & Young, 2014; Yu et al., 2016). These adult online learners instead preferred to fulfill their course learning objectives and to meet designated outcomes through active participation in a student-centered approach toward learning that helped them meet their academic goals with real-world applications (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, and Nygren, 2014; Lai, 2015).

These findings also indicated adult online learners' unmet needs and preferences created barriers to achieving their academic and career goals (Barrett, 2013; Gutiérrez-Santiuste, Gallego-Arrufat, & Simone, 2016). Lack of accommodation for meeting this learning population's needs resulted in low retention (Fetzner, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2014). Low retention indicates online education professionals should work together more consistently and cohesively, and accommodate the needs of today's adult online graduate learners ages 25 and above (Baum, Kurose, & McPherson, 2013; Caruth, 2014).

Acknowledging and accommodating this learning population's expressed needs and preferences could significantly and positively impact the quality of their online learning experiences, and increase their desire to complete their studies (Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Mello, Fleisher, & Woehr, 2015). If this collaboration and accommodation occurs, then perhaps tomorrow's non-traditional graduate students would be more satisfied with their online learning experiences, and meet their academic and career goals, resulting in improved retention of non-traditional graduate students ages 25 and above (Fetzner, 2013; Salani, Albuja, & Azaiza, 2016). Increased graduation rates by non-traditional learners would meet the former Obama administration's call to boost college graduation rates, and fulfill the goal of having the world's most college graduates by 2020 (Biden, 2011; The White House, 2012).

The primary objective of the study was to find answers for the following key research questions that arose in response to topics including barriers and needs expressed by graduate level online learners ages 25 and above. Qualitative case study methodology in the form of a modified Delphi study was used to resolve the research questions through *three rounds *[*Note: At the time of inclusion in this publication, only one round had been completed]* of online questionnaires (Brady, 2015; Davidson, 2013). Participants provided input about their specific experiences with online learning to resolve the following research questions:

Q1. What do currently enrolled graduate level online learners over age 25 identify as barriers to achieving their academic goals?

Q2. What do currently enrolled graduate level online learners over age 25 identify as potential solutions or strategies to diminish or eliminate the identified barriers?

BACKGROUND

An increase in the number of adult graduate learners ages 25 and above has created a student population of non-traditional learners who have unique educational needs and preferences as compared to their younger peers (Caruth, 2014; Mello et al., 2015). These older learners typically have significant goals requiring the pursuit of advanced degrees specifically for improving their career options or changing careers altogether (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010; Mello et al., 2015). If their specific needs are not identified, acknowledged, and accommodated, these adult graduate learners often do not complete their studies (Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Bryer, Peterson-Graziose, & Nikolaidou, 2015). This, in turn, reduces the retention rates at the learners' respective institutions (Bingham & Solverson, 2016; Bryer et al., 2015).

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