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Faculty and Student Perceptions of Motivational Traits that Contribute to Completion Rates in Online Degree Undergraduate Programs

Dr. LeAnna R. Wilson
Faculty Connections Learning

Abstract

Limited research has been conducted regarding the alignment or misalignment of student and faculty perceptions of traits that motivate students to complete an online learning degree. While studies have focused on retention and attrition rates of online students, little research has compared and contrasted student and faculty perceptions of internal characteristics that drive a student towards online degree completion.

This paper presents a study that investigated characteristics that motivate students to complete online learning degrees by way of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Three research questions were explored through a concurrent embedded mixed methods study. One hundred and three faculty and alumni students from one nationally accredited online university participated in this study. To discover student and faculty perceptions, the Intrinsic Motivator Instrument (IMI) and a series of open-ended questions were administered to both faculty and graduated students of the same university. To add richness to the study, nine faculty were interviewed regarding their perceptions of student characteristics that contribute to retention in online learning degree programs. The qualitative results revealed a misalignment of student and faculty perceptions regarding the purpose and importance of pursuing and online degree. Furthermore, quantitative analysis revealed that the null hypothesis was rejected in particular subscales of the IMI survey.

Keywords: Online learning, intrinsic motivation, faculty perceptions, student perceptions

Retention and Attrition in Online Degree Programs

Various reasons lead to students enrolling or dropping out of online degree programs. Jenkins (2012) notes that while enrollment in online learning degree programs is rising, attrition rates are also rising. There has been significant research on extrinsic factors that influence retention or attrition rates in online degree programs (Aman, 2009; Bebawi, 2005; Bedore, 2006; Boston, 2010; Brown, 2011). However, more research is needed in regards to intrinsic motivational characteristics and traits that are evident in students who have complete an online degree program. Ascertaining the alignment or misalignment of student and faculty perceptions in these programs could help universities understand how to retain students and keep enrollment and graduation rates high.

Factors That Affect Motivation, Perceptions and Retention

Many different environmental factors influence a student's ability to complete any college degree program. Inflated enrollment in online degree programs could be influenced by the differences in environmental factors that influence or motivate a student to complete their degree. Environmental "factors" such as dorms, meal plans, housing expenses, etc., are simply not in existence for many online degree program students. The non-existence of these factors could potentially be what drives many students to enroll and complete an online learning degree (Boston, 2010). Other factors such as multiple careers, family obligations, working full time in addition to attending school, and paying tuition affect retention rates and length of time it takes to achieve an online degree for older students (Boles, Cass, Levin, Schroeder, & Smith, 2010).

Patterson and McFadden's (2009) study on attrition rates and environmental factors in online degree programs versus land based institutions showed a significant difference in attrition rates between the two. In that study, attrition rates were impacted by internal course structure and online formatting of the courses (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Evan's (2009) qualitative study on external and internal factors in online degree programs showed that many students value flexibility in course structure and timing, convenience in synchronous and asynchronous online communication, and the need for positive interaction with peers and faculty during course facilitation. Boles, Cass, Levin, Schroeder, & Smith (2010) suggested that online degree programs are strengthened through strong faculty support of the students, program coordinators who provide student help, and peer mentoring students who guide online discussions, deliver, accountability, and assist with technology issues. Brown (2011) suggested that internal factors of poor time management skills, and lack of collaboration and community in the online environment affected a student's ability to complete an online course.

A qualitative study of student perceptions of online learning as related to attrition and completion rates in online degree programs showed that instructional delivery and course structure had a significant and direct impact in the synchronous delivery of the online course (Kyger, 2008). Students believed that an engaging, stimulating learning environment is largely determined by the level of teacher enthusiasm and rigor and energy in instructional delivery (Kyger, 2008). Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen (2009) found lack of community among students, teaching style, and limited synchronous interaction with the professor contributed to negative student perceptions regarding online course completion. MacIntyre (2010) noted that a student's

intrinsic motivation to learn is directly dependent on the student's capability to assimilate information. Therefore, it is essential that course designers, facilitators, and even students understand the inner workings of a text language based learning environment in order to foster positive self-perception in learners (MacIntyre, 2010).

Theories, Frameworks, and Models

A student's desire to learn can be fostered through providing opportunities of engagement in the classroom. Winkler (2011) noted that online inquiry learning involves three steps: questioning, researching information through technology, and processing new knowledge. Self-directed learners must be intrinsically motivated to self-assign goals, complete assignments, independently complete tasks, and meet deadlines (Winkler, 2011). Kempler (2006) noted that it is more difficult to intrinsically motivate students to learn in the online environment due to isolation at the computer, technology difficulties or lack of technology skills, and lack of motivation due to distraction of other websites and applications.

Two theories influenced by self-efficacy concepts are the achievement goal theory (AGT) and the self-determination theory (SDT). The achievement goal theory describes an approach or outline towards achieving a particular goal (Ciani, Sheldon, Hilpert, & Easter, 2011). Zusho and Clayton (2011) noted that the achievement goal theory helps identify the explanation behind why a student is motivated to achieve or perform. This theory suggests that setting multiple goals initiates the action needed to complete the goal including intention, reason, and development of the plan (Bjornebekk, 2008).

The self-determination theory suggests that if emotional and psychological needs are met, the learner has an increased chance to succeed and meet goals in the learning environment through autonomy, competency, and connection to others (Niemiec et al., 2006). Ryan and Deci (2008) believe that the intrinsic motivation to learn is synonymous with a learner's own feelings of autonomy in capabilities and abilities to meet the expected goals and outcomes. When psychological needs are met, active learning can occur, producing positive results (Ryan & Deci, 2008). Darner (2012) found that when a student's learning environment is infused with SDT model practices and concepts, students initiate choice, self-reflection, and produce feelings of self-confidence.

The Peer Learning Framework is a community of practice that substantiates the roles and interaction peer leaders and peer learners based on a social constructivist viewpoint (Adam, Skalicky, & Brown, 2011). Teacher involvement contributed to effective peer learning and helping students achieve course completion (Adam et al., 2011). Instructor communication and best teaching practices contributed to levels of student motivation towards student collaboration and completing assignments towards course completion (Adam et al., 2011). Instructor communication techniques including inquiry, prompting, and clarifying course curriculum provided motivation for students to use their own communication techniques throughout the course (Adam et al., 2011).

The constructivist viewpoint encourages student autonomy over learning and achieving academic success by providing opportunities for students to be inspired and motivated to learn (Miller, 2008). According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, community building activities and collaboration directly increase student motivation, drive, and academic grades (Kuh, 2007). Koohang, Riley, Smith, and Schreurs (2009) have done extensive research on how

constructivism is the foundation for the e-learning process. Koohang et al.'s (2009) e-learning constructivist model includes three tiers: design of learning activities, learning assessment, and instructor's roles in the e-learning process. Each tier is only successful if it utilizes the constructivist approach of learning through prior experiences and pre-exiting knowledge (Koohang, Riley, Smith, & Schreurs, 2009).

The Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI) consists of three components: the social, cognitive, and teaching presences. These three components are separate entities, yet depend on each other for survival in the online teaching and learning environment. Opportunities should be given to for students to exercise social and cognitive constructs so that student self-efficacy, perceptions, and attitudes about the course will be positive (Leong, 2011). Leong (2011) believes that retention in online programs will occur through student satisfaction regarding student and teacher community building constructs. The CoI Framework provides understanding of online learning as it relates to student achievement (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). Shea & Bidjerano (2012) note that a strong collaborative student-teacher bond must be formed in the online learning environment to ensure student success. Pollard, Blevins, Connor, and McGovern (2013) quantitative study revealed that the teacher, social and cognitive presence components from the CoI all directly affected student motivation. A strong connection was found between teacher presence and student motivation and social presence and student motivation to learn (Pollard, Blevins, Connor & McGovern, 2013).

As online learning has developed, the community of inquiry framework has evolved and transformed. Gregori, Torras, and Guasch's (2012) research regarding the CoI and online education explored how the technological presence impacted the cognitive and social presence in the online learning environment. Technology and online education changes the dynamics and exchange of information between faculty and students. Thus, a student's motivation to learn also changes in the context of what motivates students in the independent, self-directed online learning setting (Peiris & Gallupe, 2012).

Garrison (2011) developed the conceptual framework for e-learning out of the collaborative constructivist ideas of teaching and learning and Dewey's research regarding blended individual and social perspectives to develop new knowledge. The CoI's three components are adapted to text-based and verbal communication in the online teaching and learning environment (Garrison, 2011). Online learning requires students to interact, respond, and learn from each other through a variety of instructional practices that could include video conferencing, text-based communication, project critiques, and discussion postings (Smith, 2011). These online instructional practices often occur with students never seeing each other therefore students must be able to quickly gauge trust and comradery with each other for learning to occur through student led communication (Smith, 2011). Mistrust can develop when students feel they cannot rely on other students or their teacher for support, insight, and learning in a collaborative environment. Inevitably, this turns into lack of motivation to learn or complete the tasks with the online course structure (Smith, 2011). Chen and Jang's (2010) online model explores how learning outcomes such as engagement, achievement, learning and satisfaction are affected through need support, need satisfaction, and self-determination outcomes to succeed. Yoon and Rolland (2012) found that a student's self-confidence and ability to connect with peers greatly affected learning capacity in the online setting. The student's ability to trust others in the partaking of ideas, contextual connections, and comfort level of openness to share influenced the ability to maximize learning (Yoon & Roland, 2012).

The Study

Three research questions were explored in this mixed methods study:

1. What are the perceptions of students regarding motivational characteristics and traits students possess that allow them to complete an online degree program?
2. What are the perceptions of faculty regarding motivational characteristics and traits students possess that allow them to complete an online degree program?
3. What is the difference between the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) scale rankings of students who have graduated from an online college degree program and faculty who instruct students in an online college degree program?

The following hypotheses were addressed for Research Question 3:

H_o = There will be no statistically significant different between the IMI scale rankings of students who have graduated from an online degree program and the IMI scale rankings of faculty who instruct students in an online degree program.

H_1 = There will be a statistically significant different between the IMI scale rankings of students who have graduated from an online degree program and the IMI scale rankings of faculty who instruct students in an online degree program.

Sixty-eight out of four hundred seven alumni from undergraduate online degree programs in one national online university responded by completing the IMI survey and open-ended questions. One hundred three of the three hundred ninety-eight faculty members who had taught online degree programs from one national online university responded by also completing the IMI survey and open-ended questions. Of the thirty-six faculty who elected to be interviewed, fifteen were selected using a random number generator, and nine faculty members responded to the request. Demographic selection of participants in the study was within the constraints of students and faculty from the university.

In order to find out the perceptions of faculty and students regarding what motivates students to complete online learning degrees, a mixed methods study was utilized by administering the Intrinsic Motivator Instrument (IMI) and asking open-ended questions of both faculty and students who have completed or taught in an online learning degree program (Ryan & Deci, 2008). The IMI contains questions exploring personality traits that internally motivate and drive someone to succeed at a goal or task using a Likert-type scale coded as 1 = not at all true to 7 = very true. The five subscales used for this survey were: Interest/Enjoyment, Perceived Competence, Effort/Importance, Pressure/Tension, and Value/Usefulness. In addition, the IMI contained three fill in the blank questions from the Value/Usefulness category:

1. I think that doing this activity is useful for _____.
2. I think this is important to do because it can _____.
3. I think doing this activity could help me to _____.

The open-ended questions were embedded in a Survey Monkey link following the IMI survey questions and were worded so as to elicit student and faculty perceptions regarding motivating factors that drive students to degree completion. The quantitative portion of this study (IMI survey results) were analyzed with the help from a professional statistician using SPSS software for PC (American Statistical Association, 2011).

The open-ended questions for students were:

1. Once you started your online degree program, what were some of the external factors that motivated you to continue your degree to completion?

2. Once you started your online degree program, what were some of the internal factors that motivated you to continue your degree to completion?
3. How much weight did the internal factors play in your ability to complete your degree versus the external factors that you listed above?
4. What are three characteristics or traits you would use to describe yourself in completing a task or goal?
5. Was there any point during your online degree program where you felt like you wanted to quit? What drove you to continue on and finish?

The open-ended questions for faculty were:

1. Once a student has started an online degree program, what do you perceive the external factors to be that motivate students to continue a degree to completion?
2. Once a started has started an online degree program, what do you perceive the internal factors to be that motivate students to continue a degree to completion?
3. How much weight might the internal factors play in a student's ability to complete a degree versus the external factors that you listed above?
4. What are three characteristics or traits you would use to describe a student who has completed a task or goal?
5. Was there any point during your facilitation of an online degree program where you felt like a student wanted to quit? What do you perceive drove the student to continue on and finish the program?

To add further breadth to the study, nine faculty were interviewed, thus providing a triangulation of data. This qualitative portion of the study allowed for in depth interviews that took place through Skype and phone calls. Eight sub questions were asked of the interviewees that were derived from the open-ended questions asked in the survey link. The results from this portion of the study were analyzed using QSR*NIVO software and hand coding techniques to discover emerging themes and patterns in the faculty interviews.

Qualitative Findings and Conclusions

Research Question 1 was addressed by the results from the qualitative data found from the three fill in the blank questions from the IMI and the open-ended questions asked of the student alumni in this study. Themes and patterns emerged through the use of hand coding techniques and the QSR*NIVO software in the analysis phase of the study. The first IMI fill in the blank question asking what an online degree is used for revealed themes of: *self-discipline and self-reliance*. The second IMI fill in the blank question asking why it is important to finish an online degree found main themes such as: *self-efficacy and self achievement*. The third IMI fill in the blank question asking what online degrees help a student achieve found a main theme of: *self-actualization*. The five open-ended questions asked of the alumni students were analyzed using the QSR*NIVO software program. Question one revealed common themes of: *degree, better job, money.* Question two revealed common themes of: *self-satisfaction*, *self-confidence*, and *intrinsic motivation.* Question three revealed common themes of: *internal factors more motivating then external factors*. Question four revealed common themes of: *determination*, *focused*, and *motivated*. Finally, question five revealed common themes of: *self reflection of personal goals, self determination to finish goal until completion.*

Research Question 2 was addressed by the results from the faculty responses to the three fill in the blank questions from the IMI and the open-ended questions asked of the faculty in the study. The first IMI fill in the blank question asking what an online degree is used for revealed themes of: *critical thinking skills and problem solving skills.* The second IMI fill in the blank question asking why it is important to finish an online degree found main themes such as: *students helping other students in the online community.* The third IMI fill in the blank question asking what online degrees help a student achieve were: *self improvement and increased career opportunities.* The five open-ended questions asked of the alumni students were analyzed using the QSR*NIVO software program. Question one revealed common themes of: *family*, *social pressures*, and a *better job*. Question two revealed common themes of: *self actualization, desire to learn and achieve personal goals.* Question three revealed common themes of: *internal factors more motivating then external factors*, and *students need an internal drive to succeed*. Question four revealed common themes of: *determined, focused, time management.* Finally, question five revealed common themes of: *intrinsic motivation to complete task, faculty support to complete task.* Thus, Research Questions 1 and 2 revealed that in areas concerning what an online degree is used for and why it is important, student and faculty perceptions were not aligned. In addition, faculty and students thoughts were different regarding the purpose and importance of pursuing an online degree.

Nine faculty were interviewed using a qualitative phenomenological approach as a means of investigating further the perceptions of faculty regarding why some students are successful in completing an online learning degree. This allowed deeper insight into faculty perceptions regarding student motivation in the online learning environment. The nine faculty interviews of the eight sub-questions regarding what faculty perceived motivates students to complete online learning degrees revealed several themes found through hand coding techniques: *location of study*, *age/skill level*, *supports*, *intrinsic motivation*, *self-efficacy*, *internal drive*, *life experiences, asynchronous/synchronous learning, hardships, determination, self-improvement, beginning of the course, faculty initiative to offer supports,* and *student initiative to take supports in the online environment.*

The first sub question was: "In your experience, do undergraduate online students come prepared with a solid background in technological skills and APA/writing skills when taking an online course?" Two themes were revealed based on the interview responses to Question 1: *location of study* and *age and skill level*. For the themes of location of study, age, and skill level, many faculty talked about the differences they see in online students versus brick and mortar students. Several faculty mentioned that online students not only have to navigate through APA writing deficiencies but that is compounded with the technological issues of navigating through an online classroom. They cited age as a factor in that while younger students seem to have better computer skills needed for online learning, all students regardless of age had difficulty with writing and APA skills, which might contribute to frustration in online degree courses.

The second sub question asked, "In your experience, have you encountered online programs with external supports that help ensure online degree completion?" Three themes were revealed based on the interview responses to Question 2: *supports, motivation/self-efficacy*, and *online/land-based requirements*. While 100% of the faculty agreed that external supports are in place at the university to aid students through online courses, the students must find the intrinsic motivation to take advantage of the supports offered. Faculty also offered insight into issues with mandatory and non-mandatory basic skills classes for students. If students aren't required

to take basic writing classes, but the university offers those classes, students who lack internal motivation will not pursue the courses, thus, not do well in their required online courses for their degree. Some faculty felt that in order to help students feel successful in their learning, universities should require basic skills courses for struggling students in order to help them feel successful which might lead to a developed intrinsic drive to succeed.

The third sub question asked, "In your experience, do you think online students in general have to be better at time management skills than students who attended classes at a brick and mortar university?" Three themes were revealed based on the interview responses to sub question 3*: intrinsic motivation, life experiences,* and *asynchronous/synchronous learning*. Synchronous and asynchronous communication was a theme that emerged among faculty talking about time management and intrinsic drive to complete the course. Brick and mortar universities have the advantage of real time collaboration and communication that drives students forward and provides instant gratification of feeling successful whereas the online environment battles asynchronous communication through message boards, dealing with time zones across the country, and faculty feedback not being accessible instantly.

Sub question four asked, "How much do you think personal drive and intrinsic motivation to learn influence a student's completion of an online course?" Two themes were revealed based on the interview responses to sub question 4*: supports* and *internal drive*. 100% of the faculty interviewed agreed that internal drive was an integral component of a student's ability to complete an online learning degree. Faculty also noted that external and internal supports work together towards student achievement. Faculty mentioned how extrinsic variables such as family and friend supports can help to nurture and cultivate a student's intrinsic drive to succeed. However, many agreed that the online student must have the ability to foster his or her own learning in order to be successful.

Sub question five asked, "Have you encountered examples of students who have successfully completed an online learning degree with unstable external supports and/or resources, yet possess a strong motivation and drive to succeed, therefore they complete their degree?" Three themes were revealed based on the interview responses to sub question 5: *hardships*, *determination* and *external supports*. In talking about students with unstable external supports, seven of the nine faculty cited that most of their students do face extreme hardships and struggles in their personal lives which is why they have chosen the flexibility of online learning. However, because of those external struggles, determination and intrinsic drive helped these students overcome their obstacles and achieve their degrees in hopes of rising above their circumstances. Faculty #2 stated, "The teacher-student relationship is extremely important, even if it is just the student knowing that the teacher wants the student to succeed."

Sub question six asked, "Are the characteristics or traits that students possess motivated by desire to possess the degree at completion, or are the characteristics and traits that students possess motivated by the desire to possess what the degree will lead too?" Two themes were revealed based on the interview responses to sub question 6: *self-improvement* and *external improvement*. In talking about why students are pursuing online degrees, some faculty felt that while some students were there to increase intellectual capabilities, most of their online students placed a deeper value on how the students would feel after they achieved the degree, and the personal feelings of value and accomplishment the students would experience.

Sub question seven asked, "In your facilitation of an online course, do you notice there to be a certain week or time period when students drop out?" One theme was revealed based on the

interview responses to sub question 7: *beginning of course*. In talking about a time period when students drop out of an online course, 6 of the 9 faculty named Week 3 as the turning point. 100% of the faculty noted that students typically drop out of an online course between weeks 1-3. One faculty member stated he could gauge internal motivation in a student by external variables such as: consistency in turning assignments in on time, evidence of good writing skills, and active communication between the teacher and student.

Sub question eight asked, "How much verbal, emotional, and physical support do you think is needed to ensure that students complete their online degree?" Three themes were revealed based on the interview responses to sub question 8: *faculty initiative to offer supports*, *student initiative to take supports*, and *supports in online environment*. Many faculty believe that teacher-student collaboration is key to a student's desire to continue through an online course to completion. Seven of the nine faculty made statements regarding their own responsibility to be an active presence in the student's online experience. 100% of the faculty interviewed made statements regarding the verbal, emotional, and physical support that must be given from faculty to students in order to aid a student in completion of the course. Active synchronous communication is needed to help foster a student's drive to complete the course successfully.

Quantitative Findings and Conclusions

Research Question 3 was analyzed using several different statistical tests through SPSS including the Mann-Whitney U, Non-Directional Independent Samples Median Test, Levene's Test for Equality of Variances, and the t-test. These tests helped to find the difference between the IMI scale rankings of students and faculty for this study. The Mann-Whitney U test rejected the null hypothesis for 10 of the 27 Likert-type scale questions. Four of the ten (40%) were from the value/usefulness subscale of the IMI instrument. Faculty and student perceptions were not aligned in regards to the amount of value and usefulness students perceive completing an online degree is beneficial to them. If value and usefulness components are tied to intrinsic motivation, then faculty and student alignment of perceptions in this area would be necessary in order for the faculty to provide and plan activities that students find stimulating and beneficial to ensure student success in the online learning environment. The null hypothesis was retained for the remaining 17 questions, showing a fairly equal divide between faculty and student perceptions regarding intrinsic motivation and completing an online learning degree.

The Non-Directional Independent Samples Median Test rejected the null hypothesis for 8 of the 27 questions. Three of the eight (38%) were from the value/usefulness subscale and three of the eight (38%) were from the effort/importance subscale of the IMI. This misalignment of student and faculty perceptions regarding the amount of effort students put into their work and the value and importance they place on work ethic leads to consideration of what the ramifications are in respect to student completion rates. The null hypothesis was retained for the remaining nineteen questions from the IMI survey.

The Levene's test rejected the null hypothesis for 5 of the 27 questions. However, the assumption of unequal values didn't impact the final t-test results. Out of the five questions that were rejected, three of the five (60%) questions were from the perceived competence subscale of the IMI. This difference in faculty and student perceptions regarding self-competency could impact completion rates in online degree programs. If faculty do not understand when students are feeling self-satisfaction and autonomy in an online course, the teacher-student relationship

could be affected. It would be beneficial for faculty to know a student's perceptions of intended learning and self-autonomy levels in order to produce successful outcomes of instruction and learning throughout the online course (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009).

The t-test revealed a statistical significance for 11 questions where the *p* value was less than the alpha of .05. Of the eleven questions that were rejected, four of the eleven (36%) questions were from the value and usefulness subscale component of the IMI. This misalignment of faculty and student perceptions regarding internal student feelings and online learning activities important because faculty need to know how student internalize feelings towards their own capabilities so they can help foster intrinsic motivation in students to help them reach their fullest potential and succeed in the online learning environment.

Implications, Recommendations

The results from this study provide implications for future practices that include:
1. Explore opportunities for greater student-teacher and student-student collaboration within the online teaching environment through synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies.
2. Provide incentive opportunities for students to utilize supports in the online learning environment.
3. Explore possibilities for requiring basic skills classes for new students that help train and equip online students to be successful in future courses.

These recommendations stem from the premise that cultivating intrinsic motivation in students through extrinsic variables may contribute to a students' ability to complete an online learning degree. Providing opportunities for students to nurture their intrinsic motivation to learn and equipping faculty with the resources and avenues necessary to help students an align faculty and staff towards the same common purpose of helping students succeed by reaching their goals within the context of the online learning environment. While student data conveyed that online learning programs were vital to a student's self-evolvement and self-efficacy, faculty data conveyed the importance of student-student interaction through motivating and inspiring community in the online platform. Faculty also expressed the need for the student-teacher relationship to be strong in the online classroom to ensure student success. Therefore, merging these two different perceptions could potentially produce a strong intrinsic drive in the student to complete their degree through student-student synchronous communication and student-teacher asynchronous communication through the duration of a course. Strategies could include: more opportunities for student led discussions and community in the online classroom, and more faculty interaction with students through types of technological communication during the facilitation of the online course. These interactions could potentially increase intrinsic motivation in students to succeed through relationship building and shared responsibility for student learning in the online environment.

Faculty also suggested that although universities might have supports established for students to utilize, those supports are not required to be used by the students; therefore students do not always utilize the supports that are provided. By requiring supports such as online tutorials, APA writing help, math center use, etc. to be used by struggling students, retention rates in the program might rise as student feel more equipped and self-assured to succeed in their

courses. Implementations of incentive programs for students who take advantage of support systems at their college might foster intrinsic drive to succeed and aid students in completing an online course successfully. These suggestions align with student perceptions regarding what a degree is used for: self-actualization, increase self-efficacy, and positive self-discipline and self-reliance issues.

Five potential areas of future research were made evident through the process of completing this research study. First, future research could explore faculty motivation to collaborate and connect with students as related to faculty motivation and student success in the online teaching and learning environment. While past research has explored faculty perceptions as related to extrinsic variables, future research could explore faculty motivation as related to student success and connectedness in the online teaching and learning environment. Second, this research study revealed faculty perceptions on the need to explore teacher-student and student-student bond and collaboration needs within the context of the online learning platform. Comparing collaboration needs between student and faculty in the online platform could help to align those needs to develop student success. Third, future research is needed to further investigate the peer-learning framework as it relates to teachers supporting other teachers through online collaboration and professional development. This could impact course design, structure, curriculum how communication is utilized between teacher and student to achieve student success. The data from this study revealed certain themes and patterns about faculty initiative to offer supports to students. In addition, the results revealed the lack of teacher-to-teacher collaboration within the context of the online learning environment. Future research on how the peer-learning framework can be used for teacher-to-teacher collaboration and professional development could potentially impact course design, structure, curriculum, and teacher to student communication as related to student success in the online learning environment. Next, research is needed that will explore motivational strategies and best teaching practices that faculty can implement in order to build trust and camaraderie with their students through text-based communication. This study revealed that student self-efficacy, self-actualization, and drive to succeed are relevant to student success in the online learning platform. Synchronous and asynchronous text-based communication strategies for building student and faculty motivation to engage with each other could be examined. Finally, more research is needed to compare the differences in motivational traits between undergraduate and graduate online learning students. Areas of concentration could include demographics, age, socio-economic status, degree concentrations, etc. If differences are found in how these two groups collaborate, communicate and learn, then specific teaching practices, strategies, and communication avenues could be adjusted to ensure student success.

This research study was rooted in previous research by theorists regarding inquiry based learning, self-efficacy, various cognitive theories, the community of inquiry framework, and how past theories and models have evolved through technology in the online learning environment (Gardner, 2011; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Leong, 2011; Peiris & Gallupe, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2008; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). Although faculty and student perception did not align in some subscales of the IMI instrument, both faculty and students agreed that internal motivation and drive to succeed was a vital component necessary to ensure student degree completion.

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