Online Learning for Non-Traditional Students Through Graduation Alliance

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A Special Project

Presented to

Dr. Gretta Merwin

Heritage University

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Education

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2016

FACULTY APPROVAL

Online Learning for Non-Traditional Students Through Graduation Alliance

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, a new form of learning, identified as online learning, had been attempted within school services and higher education to help provide an education for all students. This study focused on reviewing what online learning was, best practices for online teaching, and how online programs impacted the graduation rates of a group of high school students. This study was designed to use a QUAL-quan research method to determine if the students from the online Graduation Alliance program would graduate compared to those students from the school district. The results of the study demonstrated the impact that online learning had on the participants.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background for the Project

In the State of Washington, there had been an effort to develop dropout prevention programs and support at-risk youth to remain in school. In Washington State, there were 77.2 % of the students who graduated resulting in 22.8 % students who had dropped out. With an increase in technology, online education had been making a change in education. According to a report in Open Education Database, Online Colleges in Washington (2014), "The state has succeeded in making web-based k12 programs a legitimate option for students in need of supplemental coursework, whether that be to finish out a grade or to accelerate towards graduation and college enrollment" (p.1).

A school district in Central Washington State had partnered with an online dropout prevention program called Graduation Alliance. Graduation Alliance provided students online learning to assist with credit recovery, advancement in school, and a path to high school graduation. The program provided the students with a local advocate who helped them with case management, and an academic coach who reviewed their academic progress. Each class that a student took was online. For each class completed a student received .25 credit towards graduation.

Statement of the Problem

The school district where the study took place believed in providing equal opportunities to all students. The district experienced an increase of students dropping out of high school and had no other opportunity for students to receive an education. Therefore,

the district partnered with Graduation Alliance to help students stay in school and receive an education.

Purpose of the Project

This research examined Graduation Alliance, an online learning program, to discover if Graduation Alliance's online education programs supported non-traditional students. Also were there specific support systems that helped the students or skill sets that the students had in common that made online learning effective for them?

Delimitations

The study focused on evaluating the senior students who participated in Graduation Alliance in comparison to the seniors of the school district. There were 263 seniors who participated at the school district's traditional classroom model and there were a total of 33 students in Graduation Alliance, of which 12 were seniors during the fall 2014 to fall 2015 school year. There were 12 students who were seniors, 8 were juniors, 6 were sophomores, and 7 were freshman and 1 was an eighth grader. The students who were served in the program were students who were considered non-traditional or at-risk youth. The students were students who were working full-time jobs, some recently had a baby, and some were dealing with health problems. The district had 97.9 % of students on free and reduced lunch, 5.9% dropout rate, and 64.8 % estimated to graduate on time (Report Card, 2015).

Assumptions

Non-traditional or at-risk youth had a difficult time continuing their education. School districts with non-traditional students had a hard time keeping the students in school and getting them to graduate.

<u>Hypothesis</u>

Non-traditional seniors who wanted to earn their diploma through Graduation Alliance performed better in the online learning environment than staying in the traditional school environment as measured by the graduation rates.

<u>Null Hypothesis</u>

Traditional senior students who participated in the regular mainstream education were more likely to graduate than seniors enrolled in Graduation Alliance as measured by the graduation rates.

<u>Significance of the Project</u>

The intent of this project was to provide information that assisted with recruiting students into Graduation Alliance. In addition, the project intended to determine which students were best suited to participate and the services that were the best support. The final outcome of the project intended to provide information for training the staff and instructors of Graduation Alliance.

<u>Procedure</u>

A review of selected literature relevant to the study was conducted through Heritage University's library and online research journal sites. The review of literature helped to determine the focus of the study.

Prior research had been conducted on the graduation program and the researcher was able to review graduation rates and program successes. Data was collected on behalf of the students who participated in Graduation Alliance and the number of students who graduated in the traditional high school in 2014-2015. Demographic data of candidates was obtained during the entrance to the program to gather information on the student population

being served. The demographics of the students in the Graduation Alliance program were reviewed to determine the students who were non-traditional, their background, and the circumstances that led to their inclusion in the program.

An interview was conducted with the academic coach to see what strategies she followed to help the students. The students who graduated were interviewed to see how Graduation Alliance helped them reach their graduation goals to determine best practices. At the end of the year, the researcher compiled a report to share the results of the research with the program staff and administrators.

Definition of Terms

a-synchronous learning. A-synchronous learning was the idea a student could learn the same material at different times and at different locations.

at-risk student. An at-risk student was a student who was considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school.

blended learning. Blended learning was also known as hybrid or a mixed-mode course and were classes where a portion of the traditional face-to-face instruction was replaced by web-based online learning.

non-traditional student. A non-traditional student was a student who held several characteristics that could include being over the age of twenty-four, having a full time job, being married or a single parent, having children and being considered financially independent.

synchronous learning. Synchronous learning was the idea that students needed to attend learning at a location at the same time and same place such as attending class.

Acronyms

      <u>ELL</u>. English Language Learner.

      <u>GED</u>. General Equivalency Diploma

      <u>OSPI.</u> Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Selected Literature

Introduction

The researcher organized this section with a review of selected literature to determine what was known about online education. The results of the review focused on the topics of at-risk youth, online learning, and online teaching strategies. The topics demonstrated the importance of understanding the background of a fresh educational model and how they pertained to the study.

Non-Traditional Learners and At -Risk Youth

In the world with change and advancement in technology, education had become more of a need to compete for employment. "The combination of a limping economy, global outsourcing, the aging Baby Boom generation, an ever-increasing rate of technological advancement and implementation, and the resultant need for new and updated job skills has forced an older population back into the classroom" (Jesnek, 2012, p.1). This shift had changed the demographic student population and these students encountered many obstacles such as having to learn how to balance life, family, and work or the loss of work. However, the biggest obstacle that stood in these students' way was managing all of the barriers and going to school at the same time.

In the k-12 field of education, the term at-risk was often used to describe a demographic of students. The term at-risk did not have a single definition when applied to students in k-12 education. According to North America Council for Online Learning (Gemin & Watson, 2008),

While there wasn't universal agreement about the nature of the risk itself, most educators would concur that the ultimate risk is that the student will exit from his or her K-12 education before successfully completing it. These students may drop out, flunk out, be pushed out, or "age out" of school, but the impact on them and society is fundamentally the same. (p. 5)

This study used the term at-risk to cover all of these. According to the Glossary of Education Reform (Abbot, 2014), at-risk students possessed many similar characteristics such as physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and prolonged or persistent health issues. In addition, at-risk students also showed a trend in habitual truancy, incarceration history, or adjudicated delinquency along with family welfare, parental educational attainment, income levels, employment status, or immigration status. Last, some at-risk youth also came from households in which the primary language spoken was not English.

According to the report, Ending the Silent Epidemic: A Blueprint to Address America's High School Dropout Crisis (2012), " described the challenges that faced U.S. schools—and society as a whole—because of students becoming disengaged and dropping out of school" (p.5). (As cited in Gemin and Watson, 2008) According to the report, every 29 seconds a student had given up causing an end result of more than one million American high school students who dropped out every year.

"In the State of Washington, on average, a high school graduate earned $9,951 more each year than a high school dropout and roughly 30,600 students in Washington did not graduate from high school in 2011" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2012, p.1). If there were an increase in graduates, it would increase homes sales, auto sales, new jobs, and

increase annual state tax revenue. Therefore, increasing the rates of students graduating was crucial.

Online Learning

The role of technology in society had changed as various modes of information and communication had become increasingly available throughout work, school, and home environments (Condie & Livingston, 2007). The literature noted e-learning, distance learning, distance education, Web instruction, and online learning were all terms used to describe non-traditional approaches to instruction (Carnevale, 2001; Saba, 2005). Cavanaugh, Barbour, and Clark (2009) defined online learning as learning that occurred through digital rather than analog means.

Online learning had expanded and had many styles to its instruction. Online learning included synchronized learning, a-synchronize learning, and blended learning. This study focused on all three methods.

"Asynchronous e-learning, commonly facilitated by media such as e-mail and discussion boards, supports work relations among learners and with teachers, even when participants cannot be online at the same time" (Hrastinksi, 2007, p.1). This flexibility made this learning environment popular. This type of learning made it easier for people to study, work, and have time for family all together. Asynchronous learning allowed students who needed more flexibility to be able to log on at any time to do school work.

"Synchronous e-learning, commonly supported by media such as video conferencing and chat, had the potential to support e-learning in the development of learning communities" (Hrastinski, 2007, p.1). These types of learning allowed students to have more of a face-to-face connection and be able to ask questions and receive

immediate feedback. This environment allowed students to interact and participate in group communities rather than being in isolation.

"Researchers have tried to determine the medium that works "better"- such studies generally yielded no significant differences" (Hrastinski, 2008, p. 52). The idea was knowing the difference between each type and using them based on the audience and style of students' learning and their needs. Sometimes, the a-synchronized learning program could be used; however, there would be a need to schedule some synchronized time to answer questions or review subject matters. At other times the synchronized program would be used for instruction, although students would have discussion questions, or online assignments to conduct on their own time. Knowing the difference between the two teaching modalities and how they worked and served students was most important to understand.

In addition to a-synchronized and synchronized models, there was also a blended model for online learning. A blended program combined the a-synchronized model with some class instruction in real face-to-face time. Depending on the learning program a blended program required a percentage of time in a class setting, while the remaining percentage was completed online via the a-synchronized model. "Blended learning was usually viewed as a combination of face-to-face and online delivery methods, with the aim of each complementing the other" (Poon, 2013, p.1).

According to Dzuiban, Hartman & Moskal (2004)"Blended learning was a method that has proven to be not only effective in terms of learning outcomes, but ranks high on ratings of satisfaction with students and instructors" (p.1). (As cited in Morrison, 2013). In a blended model, students had the opportunity to receive guidance and instruction on

assignments and technical support from the instructor that allowed them to complete their online work after receiving class instruction. According to Lopez, Perez, and Ariza, (2011), "Blended learning can foster a decrease in student attrition and facilitate an increase in the passing rate for student examinations" (p. 273). (As cited in Poon, 2013).

Online Teaching Best Practices

In online learning, teachers had to use different preparation strategies, teaching strategies, and assessment methods to be able to teach a course effectively. According to The Times Educational Supplement (2002), they reported that ― "there is growing evidence from research in [e-learning] that certain strategies…will enhance teaching and learning - just as certain tactics and strategies do work in face-to-face pedagogy" (p. 23). (As cited in Hanover Research Council, 2009). Everything started with how a classroom was set up and that usually began with expectations. However, with online learning, there was a need in providing an extra effort in clear expectations that focused on communication between students and students, and students and instructor, as well as when and how assignments should be completed.

According to the Online Teaching Strategies report by Hanover Research Council (2009), they suggested that "instructors should provide sufficient orientation for students in regards to the technology and instructional in the course" (p.18). Such methods could include posting welcome messages that helped students get started in the course, providing contact information and response times for the instructor as well as how to receive tech support. Having office hours that were shared with students, and structuring the course so it provided guidelines and other policies that supported the students were important factors to consider when preparing an online course.

In addition, creating a safe community of learning helped students feel at ease with online learning. Lally and Wallington (2002) stated that a course should be designed to have three dialogues of faculty to student, student to student, and student to resources. Starting the course with a discussion response that allowed students to introduce themselves was a good way for students to get to know each other and the instructor as well. However, the instructor had to encourage and facilitate student to student interactions and discussion online. "Vygotsky's theories remind us that we learn as social beings within a social contact and the online community part is what makes this happen for some students" (Boetcher, 2013, p.1). Online instructors had to go the extra mile and find ways to make students feel comfortable and wanting to participate from the beginning of the course.

Online instructors served as models for what was to be expected from a course. If the outcome was to get students to participate in online discussions, then the instructor also had to participate and be visible for students. An instructor could model appropriate writing, and also be able to guide the discussion and encourage critical thinking. The timing of communication was extremely important. An instructor should respond to student questions in a timely manner to show students the importance of completing assignments on time.

Many online programs integrated a type of communication through discussion boards as a way that allowed students and the instructor to have an intellectual discourse as they would in a face-to-face classroom. This required students to write their responses to a given prompt and interact by responding to other classmates. According to Cole and Kritzer (2009), "Electronic discussion boards are useful in allowing both a demonstration

of instructor presence as well as a facilitation of student community" (p. 37). Instructors wanted to show their presence, however, they needed to be careful not to control the discussion forums, but rather insure that they facilitated the discussion and engaged the class as a whole. Discussion boards allowed student voices to be heard. In a study completed by Donathan and Hanks (2009), "Using the discussion boards allowed students to see different perspectives and learn from their peer's experiences and it increased student interaction" (p. 590). Discussion forums were a unique characteristic of online learning and teaching and, if facilitated well, they helped in creating a community of learning. According to Al-Asfour (2012), "the ethos that 'each one teach one' or 'everyone shares the teaching' is practiced in online education" (p.20) and this could be accomplished through online discussion boards.

The online learning experience required structured, easy to follow instructions, links that were current and operational, and timely feedback. The non-traditional student required feedback that was useful, straightforward and applicable. Students who had their time and attention engaged on other matters, such as family and work, appreciated quick responses to emails. Faculty teaching online needed to set aside time to respond to emails, review work submitted, address student issues, and provide steady feedback to students on the work they had submitted. "Feedback is an imperative aspect of coursework that student's need as they moved from module to module, assignments tended to build on one another and feedback from one assignment informed the next one" (Marrero, 2015, p.1). By providing quick responsive feedback it helped students feel supported and not alone dealing with confusion. In online learning faculty needed to be quick to be proactive in regards to questions or concerns that came up in the course to try to stay ahead of the

students. In an article, Ten Best Practices for Teaching Online Quick Guide for New Online Faculty (Boetcher, 2012),

> The number 1 best practice is to be present on course site by use of communication tools such as posting announcements to students, and using discussion boards as this shows the students that the instructor cares cares. Instructors need to show that they care about the questions and concerns and are able to be present to mentor and coach as an instructor should do. (p. 1)

As with traditional courses, online learning also required the instructor to keep students engaged. According to Marrero (2015), "Social connectedness in the online environment has been found to support student success in the online environment; students that form social relationships in an online environment are more likely to persist" (p.1). "Faculty are encouraged to develop activities that engage students in group projects, lively discussion boards and synchronous online meetings, which provide a rich, engaging and stimulating environment" (Ivankova & Stick, 2005, p.10).

The design of the instruction was also an important component to online teaching. When designing a learning experience for the non-traditional student it was important to keep flexibility top-of-mind, and so both asynchronous and synchronous models worked. Webcasts, chat rooms, desktop audio, pre-recorded lectures, Skype, Facebook, cell phones and Twitter could all help with information sharing and delivering instruction, which served to support the online experience. Instructors needed to be familiar with the different social technology services and be creative in how they integrated the platforms into instruction. Finding the platforms that were best suited for the students was important as well ensuring that the students knew how to use the communication strategy. Instructors

needed to select tools that directly spoke to the wide range of needs of diverse learners in online classrooms. These tools were beneficial for learners because those resources were tools that students were already using such as Pinterest and Twitter and they allowed students to gain information that pertained to the class outside the classroom structure. In addition, those tools helped instructors stay current in resources, tools, and lesson planning.

Finding ways to use a variety of large group, small group, and individual work experiences was also important for online instruction. Students could learn more and have a greater effect in understanding coursework when they were able to work in small groups or with a partner.

In addition to finding best practices for teaching online, the need for assessments was also important. The use of formative assessment was beneficial in the online classroom because it served as a quick check for understanding what would proactively guide lessons or discussions based on the needs of the students. Formative assessments assisted the instructor in gathering information as to where the whole class was on the subject matter and this type of assessment also allowed students to check their own level of understanding. Most of all, formative assessments allowed instructors to find creative methods to identify gaps in student learning.

Summary

The focus of this chapter was to address the available evidence in regards to the topics of who were non-traditional learners and at-risk youth, what online learning was, and what were online teaching best practices. According to the research, online learning was taking a twist and providing educational opportunities to a group of students who were considered non-traditional or at-risk. Understanding the student population that online

learning had targeted was important to understand in order to instruct in the new learning environment. The research concluded, with the awareness of what online learning was and the teaching methodologies that were considered best practices for teaching online, students should be able to succeed in online learning.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Treatment of Data

Introduction

Graduation Alliance in partnership with a school district in Central Washington State provided an online high school graduation program for students who were in 9th through 12th grade. The researcher sought to determine if the students who participated in this program were able to meet the state and district graduation requirements on time.

Methodology

The researcher chose to do a QUAL-Quan research model to evaluate the online Graduation Alliance high school program to determine if this program prepared its students to graduate. This particular project began with a review of selected literature that was conducted through the use of Heritage University's on-line database, as well as through the use of internet search engines. Literature and information were also gathered from the professional resources through the Graduation Alliance program. After the review of the literature was conducted, the researcher narrowed the focus of the research project.

The researcher collected student data using an exploratory survey during the 2014-2015 school year when the students were in their senior year. In addition, student demographic data and academic data were collected from the partnering school district.

Throughout the 2014-2015 year, the researcher was able to conduct participation observations to gather information from the students in their natural environment based on their usual behaviors in the program. The observations took place during the weekly meet

ups and during monthly home visits. Individual interviews were also used to collect data to determine the commonalities that the student participants shared and to determine the common factors that were provided to them in the program to reach graduation. These interviews were important because the students were able to be more candid than they would using surveys alone.

<u>Participants</u>

The researcher selected the participants who were in their senior year. The participants consisted of 12 students ages 17 to 19. In the experimental group, there were 4 male students and 8 female students. The ethnic make-up of the experimental groups consisted of 100% Hispanic. The participants were selected based on them being in the Graduation Alliance program and in their senior. The program had an average of 33 students participating in the school year but only 12 who were seniors.

<u>Instruments</u>

At the beginning of the school year, Survey Monkey was developed and used as an exploratory survey. The questions consisted of gathering demographic background, educational background, personal short stories of why they joined the program, and what their academic goals were going to be for the school year. The researcher wanted to explore what demographic group of students were joining the program, why they were joining, if they were planning to finish the year, if they were planning to participate for a semester only, or if they planned to extend their graduation time line.

Late spring of 2015, sample open-ended questions were established to conduct the individual interviews of the 12 students who participated. The questions focused on why the students chose the program, what part of the program helped them to reach their goal

of graduation, and why they felt that they were able to graduate with this program versus staying in the high school. Videos, pictures, and notes were used to gather information from the participant observations. The researcher was also able to gather district data from the OSPI website as well as from the high school district assistant principal to establish student's scores of the state requirements as well as the graduation rate of the general study body at the high school.

Design

The researcher chose to include a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches to build on the strength of the information gathered. According to Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009), " In the QUAL-quan model, also known as the exploratory mixed methods design, qualitative data are collected first and are more heavily weighted than quantitative data" (p.463). This study design allowed the use of a qualitative study first by using interviews with open-ended questions and then testing the hypothesis with quantitative techniques using a demographic survey and graduation data.

Procedure

A review of selected literature relevant to the study was conducted through Heritage University's library and online research journal sites. The review of literature helped to determine the focus of the study.

Prior research had been conducted on the graduation program and the researcher was able to review graduation rates and program successes. Data was collected on behalf of the students who participated in Graduation Alliance and the number of students who graduated in the traditional high school in 2014-2015. Demographic data of candidates was obtained during the entrance to the program to gather information on the student population

being served. The demographics of the students in the Graduation Alliance program were reviewed to determine the students who were non-traditional, their background, and the circumstances that led to their inclusion in the program.

An interview was conducted with the academic coach to see what strategies she followed to help the students. The students who graduated were interviewed and surveyed to see how Graduation Alliance helped them reach their graduation goals to determine best practices. Throughout the year, participant observations were conducted.

Treatment of the Data

The data gathered from the survey was calculated and examined using the Microsoft Excel program through the use of survey monkey. Responses from the survey were numerically represented on a scale from 1-4, and participants were categorized as male or female. All the information was represented in Microsoft Excel data sheets, as well as Microsoft Excel data graphs. The data gathered from the district for graduation rates and state assessments were tabulated and examined using the Microsoft Excel program and the information gathered from the interviews was organized in Microsoft Word with a table chart.

Summary

This chapter was designed to review the methodology and treatment of data to determine if students who received education through Graduation Alliance were able to graduate through online learning. The researcher sought to design the study by using the QUAL-quan method to be able to gather the strength of the online model through both interviews, surveys and graduation data. The analysis of data and findings from this study were reported using a combination of graphs and charts.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Data

<u>Introduction</u>

This chapter presented the results of the analyzed data that compared the effectiveness of online learning for at-risk and non-traditional students with that of face-to-face in-class setting learning. The data that was gathered included the reasons students had for leaving school, the amount of time students were out of school before entering the Graduation Alliance program, and actual graduation rates.

<u>Description of the Environment</u>

The study focused on evaluating the senior students who participated in Graduation Alliance in comparison to the seniors of the school district during the fall school year of 2014 to fall 2015. Graduation Alliance and the school district served students from one small agricultural community in Central Washington. The students who were served in the program were students who were considered non-traditional or at-risk youth.

Table 1.0 Student Demographics

Data	School District	Graduation Alliance	
Total Students	647	33	
Total Seniors	263	12	
Total Graduates	203	12	

<u>Hypothesis</u>

Non-traditional seniors who wanted to earn their diploma through Graduation Alliance performed better in the online learning environment than staying in the traditional school environment as measured by the graduation rates.
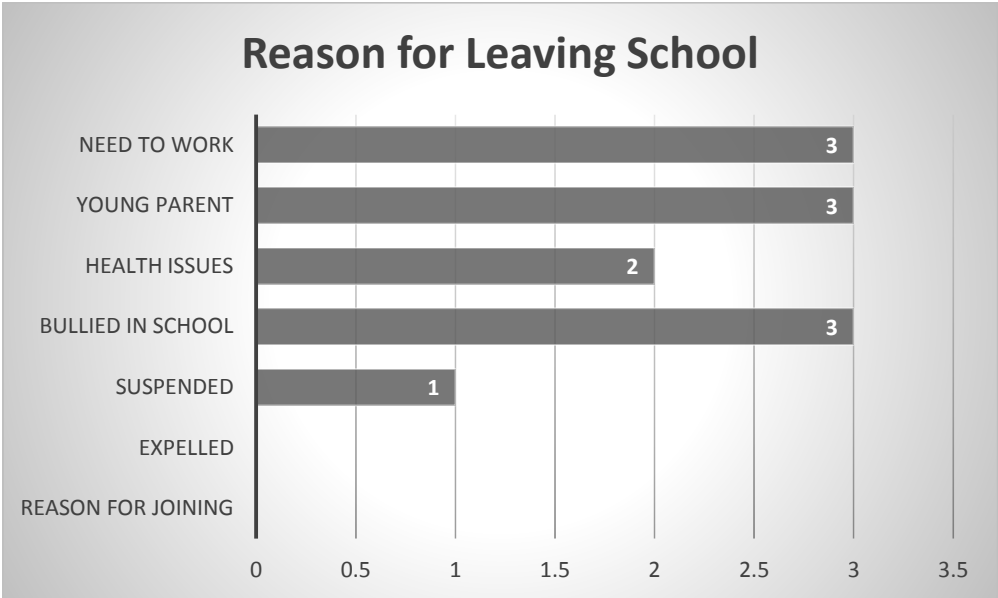
<u>Null Hypothesis</u>

Traditional senior students who participated in the regular mainstream education were more likely to graduate than seniors enrolled in Graduation Alliance as measured by the graduation rates.

<u>Results of the Study</u>

Students entering the program each participated in a pre-survey prior to joining the online program to gather demographic background, an understanding of why they joined, their educational backgrounds, and goals. The program had a total of 33 students in which 12 were seniors at the time of entry into the program. Of the 12 seniors, 4 were male, and 8 were female. One hundred percent of the senior class were from a Hispanic cultural background. The ages of the students varied; 10 were the age of 18, and 2 were the age of 17.

As part of the survey, students were questioned to gather some background information to determine why they were no longer at the high school and why they wanted to join the online program. Out of the 12 seniors, 3 stated that they had to work to support their families, 3 additional students stated that they had a child or were pregnant and could not be at school, 3 additional students stated that they were bullied and felt uncomfortable, 2 students struggled with anxiety and depression, and 1 was suspended from school.

Table 1.1 Data on School Drop Out

Reason for Leaving School

Reason	Value
NEED TO WORK	3
YOUNG PARENT	3
HEALTH ISSUES	2
BULLIED IN SCHOOL	3
SUSPENDED	1
EXPELLED	
REASON FOR JOINING	

(Horizontal axis: 0, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, 3, 3.5)

The last part of the survey questioned the students to determine how long they had been out of school. A group of students that consisted of 50% of the group had been out of school between two to four months, with 17% out of school less than a week and 33% were out of school between one month or less. Students were questioned to determine their time on track for graduation with a review of credits in addition to time in school to establish a graduation plan of action.

All 12 students were interviewed once they reached graduation to determine how the online program assisted them with reaching their goal of graduation. One hundred percent of the students who participated stated that the flexibility in completing school work on their own time was the key component that made it achievable because going to school and participating in class for a full school day was leading them to drop out of high school and the main reason for them not succeeding. An additional factor that assisted these students was the ability of not having to physically attend the school campus. Due to the barriers that caused a disruption to them attending school, online learning was a better source for them. One student stated that "Graduation Alliance, allowed me to take care of my baby, continue my education, and work. I didn't have to worry about getting to school early, or anyone talking bad about me being a young mother."

Throughout the year, students were observed and interviewed in their natural environment that consisted of a weekly meet up with their local advocate, who served as an advisor or counselor. The researcher was able to notice that when students first participated in the program there was a strong attitude shield; students showed toughness and lacked self-esteem. As time progressed, students' attitudes began to relax and open up with their local advocate and a shift in attitude from I'm a drop out, to I will graduate. Students often mentioned in their weekly meetings that they didn't feel welcomed, supported, or wanted in the school and they realized that through online school it was a different environment. Students shared that they felt accepted and encouraged to graduate.

In addition to weekly meetings with their local advocate, students also met with their local advocate via home visits. The local advocate mentioned that when the first home visits took place, both students and families felt as if they were in trouble. They mentioned

that they weren't used to a home visit being a friendly and kind activity. Over time, families and students began to show more of a welcoming relationship with the local advocate leading to special dinners and having the house clean and ready for the special visit.

On the other hand, the students' responses also identified that one of the least effective components to online learning was the skill of time-management. All students indicated that they had to be self-motivated, organized, and learn how to manage time effectively to ensure they did not fall behind. One students stated, " I fell behind for a month because it is easy to loose motivation, but my local advocate helped me get back up."

The researcher was able to conclude that the local advocate held a special place for these students and contributed to their success of reaching graduation. When the interviews were conducted, 100% of the students stated that the local advocate contributed to their success. One student stated, "My local advocate showed me that she cared about me and never judged me."

Discussion

Online learning through the Graduation Alliance program provided a learning opportunity for at-risk students. The online program followed teaching best practices and supported student instruction, and provided students with an alternative opportunity of receiving a high school diploma.

Online learning was seen as a means of learning that could replace the in-class setting for some students; however, this type of learning still needed to have face-to-face interaction with a person who could support students. Online learning required initial set

up support, and students needed to have time-management and organizational skills. Online learning required self-motivation.

Summary

This chapter summarized the results of the data that compared the effectiveness of online learning for at-risk and non-traditional students with that of face-to-face in-class setting learning. The data that was gathered included the reasons students had for leaving school, such as needing to work, being young parents, having health issues, being bullied in school or being suspended. The data that was collected from the partnering school showed that 100% of the students in Graduation Alliance graduated and the school district had 77% of their students who graduated. The overall results showed that students felt comfortable, were supported by a local advocate, and felt like they were believed in, and that helped the students reach their goal of graduating. The overall data supported the hypothesis that stated that non-traditional students could succeed in the online Graduate Alliance program.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

<u>Introduction</u>

The researcher studied the Graduation Alliance program as an online model to determine if it would be an effective form of education for non-traditional and at-risk youth. This chapter provided a review of the study that was conducted with conclusions and recommendations for future applications of online learning.

<u>Summary</u>

Online education had become a new tool in education. However, many educators and families questioned its effectiveness in learning and if that style of learning was even helping people learn. The researcher chose to study the online high school graduation program called Graduation Alliance that served students from a local community school district in Central Washington. The study used a QUAL-Quan method to be able to use both qualitative and quantitate data to determine if the online program created an effective and a supportive learning environment.

According to the literature review, online learning could serve non-traditional students and at-risk youth. There were also different methods of online learning, and there were some best teaching practices to consider for facilitating online learning. The Graduation Alliance program served non-traditional and at-risk youth. The literature review described this population of learners as those needing extra support to face their specific educational challenges.

The literature review focused on the variety of online learning methods such as synchronized and a-synchronized methods. Both methods were online methods, but

synchronized followed more of a structure and face-to-face time that may be needed. In addition to online learning methods, the literature review shared some best practices such as providing an online orientation, creating a safe online learning environment, and sharing communication methods as key components to facilitating online learning.

To complete the study, the researcher used surveys through Survey Monkey and conducted individual interviews. Graduation and academic data were also gathered from the partnering school district where the students were enrolled. The information was analyzed and presented.

Conclusions

From the study, it was determined that assisting the non-traditional and at-risk student population through online learning was a good form of education for them. The responsibility of the district was to serve all students and leave no child behind, and the partnership of Graduation Alliance with the district had a positive impact for these students because it allowed them an opportunity to an education within their means of support.

The total number of seniors in the program all were able to graduate and complete the state and district requirements that allowed the students to receive a school diploma versus dropping out or receiving a GED certificate. Had these students been in the district's high school they would not have completed their education due to their personal and educational barriers.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study a few recommendations were suggested. Since this study was conducted in a one year time span, the researcher would recommend analyzing the program over a longer period of time to justify its success over a five year

period. In addition, conducting focus groups would be recommended to gather clearer explanations on what was beneficial for the students and how Graduation Alliance could improve. The last recommendation includes looking at post graduation data to determine if the students who graduated from Graduation Alliance pursued a post-secondary education or career path.

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APPENDIX

Graduation Alliance Entrance Survey

Name: _____   Grade_____   Phone:_____

1. Why have you decided to join Graduation Alliance?

2. What caused you to leave the school?

3. What is your overall goal?

4. Are you planning to return to the high school at any time or do you plan to graduate through Graduation Alliance?

5. Are you transferring from the high school or have you been out of school for a while?

    a. If you have been out of school for a while please share how long and the barrier that caused you not to attend school?

6. What are your fears about attending online school?

7. Who is your support system?

8. Please complete your first assignment that asks you to write a paragraph explaining your background and educational background . You will complete this as your first assignment online. This will help me get to know you better so that I can better assist you in your goals.