Graduate Student Motivations to Learn Online

Patricia L. Banyas\(^1\), Terri M. Gustafson\(^2\) and Jessica L. Knott\(^3\)

\(^1\) Michigan State University/College of Education, East Lansing, USA
\(^2\) Michigan State University/College of Education, East Lansing, USA
\(^3\) Michigan State University/College of Education, East Lansing, USA

Abstract— This paper looks at the motivations behind student selection and subsequent enrollment in Michigan State University’s (MSU) online Master of Science (MS) in Pharmacology and Toxicology and the Professional Science Masters (PSM) in Integrative Pharmacology programs. Investigating what drives graduate level students to enroll in an online program may help illustrate the expectations they bring to their learning experiences. The research questions are derived from relative theoretical readings, specifically Tinto’s Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition and Bean and Metzner’s A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition.

Index Terms—Graduate, Motivation, Online, Students

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at the motivations behind student selection and subsequent enrollment in Michigan State University’s (MSU) online Master of Science (MS) in Pharmacology and Toxicology and the Professional Science Masters (PSM) in Integrative Pharmacology programs. Our interest derives from our involvement in the development of online programs, specifically in student motivations. Data collected from this study, in turn, could prove useful in faculty development initiatives at department levels, and could additionally affect policy decisions at the administrative level.

Investigating what drives graduate level students to enroll in an online program may help illustrate the expectations they bring to their learning experiences. The research questions are derived from relative theoretical readings, specifically Tinto’s Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition and Bean and Metzner’s A Conceptual Model of Nontraditional Student Attrition. It is our hypothesis that graduate students hold many of the same needs and expectations as undergraduate students, but that their motivations will be more closely tied to employment and future goals.

II. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

We hypothesize that a number of the factors affecting attrition and retention of graduate students parallel their motivations for selecting a particular graduate program. Many graduate student concerns mirror those of nontraditional undergraduates, varying from the concerns of traditional undergraduates with regard to challenges such as job pressures and family commitments. Tinto [1] references Givens and Wimmerus (1998), stating that “A theory of graduate persistence much recognize that the primary reference groups for doctoral students, as opposed to undergraduates generally, are the more local student and faculty communities that reside in the schools; programs, and departments that house the specific fields of study in which the doctoral degree is pursued” (p. 232). The current research project focuses on the attributes, entry orientations, and institutional experience components of Tinto’s longitudinal model of graduate persistence.

In their conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition, Bean and Metzner [2] investigate student attributes such as age, residence, enrollment status, and educational goals, academic variables such as major certainty and environmental variables such as finances and hours of employment. These components mirror Tinto’s 1993 model, which inspects student attributes, educational experiences, background, educational and occupational goals, financial assistance, and external commitments. With regard to external commitments and financial considerations, Tinto [1] finds that “together with goal commitments, these [external and financial commitments] establish the parameters of the student’s participation in graduate school, in this case as measured by full- or part-time attendance and by place of residence (on or off-campus). As in the case of commitments and goals, participation patterns have an important, though indirect, impact upon persistence” (p. 239). By gathering demographic and perceptual data using questions based on the work of Bean and Metzner and Tinto, we explore how program selection relates to students’ personal and professional goals as well as degree completion.

The chart in Appendix A illustrates selected components of each theoretical perspective in relation to the survey questions. Bean and Metzner’s academic and environmental variables overlap with many of Tinto’s entry orientations in questions involving student selection based on family and work considerations, personal connections to the institution, and opinions held about education in general. A similar relationship between Bean and Metzner’s [2] social integration and Tinto’s [1] integration factors occur in relation to questions addressing student expectations about the kinds of interactions they will be afforded by the program. Further rationale for applying Bean and Metzner’s concepts to the current study involves the inclusion of psychological outcomes when referring to questions about what students personally hope to gain by completing the program.

We expect to see that environmental variables have a stronger influence on student selection of a program. Bean and Metzner indicate that environmental variables area assumed to be more influential to nontraditional student attrition. Questions about choice based on program alliance with work and family responsibilities, as well as future goals and financial considerations are expected to show stronger relevance that those that indicate choice based on personal connection to the institution or the program’s perceived prestige.
Demographic data are expected to play less of an influential role in the decision to enroll in an online graduate program. As indicated by Bean and Metzner, demographic data, such as age and a more determinate factor in relation to the likelihood that student family and work responsibilities impact the decision-making process. Additionally, psychological and social integration factors should play a secondary role to other aspects of Bean and Metzner variables.

With this research, we aim not only to ascertain the student perspective on this aspect of the online learning realm, we also investigate the ramifications for graduate and non-traditional students attempting to navigate this sphere. Better understanding of the motivations and factors that drive students to enroll in an online graduate program will ultimately inform the best way to serve students, prepare faculty and provide educational experiences that meet student needs and increase retention and student success in these programs.

The study focuses on the overarching research question: Do non-cognitive variables play a role in the selection of an online graduate program? Within this, we have identified three key categories; convenience, goals, and institutional perceptions that may address factors that influence selection of an online graduate program

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this literature review we address the factors associated with graduate student motivation to choose an online degree program over the traditional on-campus learning environment and review factors that reveal why online learning is not the correct choice for some graduate students. Motivational factors for choosing an online degree program are distance from the institution of choice, external commitments, flexibility, and career advancement requirements [3,4,5]. Hesitation to enroll in online courses is driven by factors such as degree validity, cost, and discomfort or unfamiliarity with technology [6].

A. Reasons for Pursuing Graduate Education

According to the literature, the reasons students provided for pursuing graduate education vary, ranging from the desire for a career a career in academia to employment-related factors such as pursuit of higher paying jobs. Payne and Johnson [5] found that students’ plans for using their degrees include “meeting critical professional development goals, increasing salaries and starting a new career” (p. 125). One of their participants shared “I am primarily pursuing the program for personal growth, but it will also give me additional credibility within my industry” [5, p. 125]. Gettysburg College [7] has published a list of reasons for why students pursue graduate education, from the college’s perspective. Three of the driving factors Gettysburg notes as motivation for potential graduate students to enroll in a program include career goals requiring pursuit of advanced higher education, passion about a subject, advanced degrees opening the door to additional career opportunities, and salary increases.

Motives for choosing online options include (but are not limited to) convenience, efficiency, usefulness, flexibility, increased employability and financial gain [3 – 6, 8, 9].

B. Students’ Selection of Online Learning Opportunities

The number of online degree programs for graduate study have been growing steadily over time. The 2010 annual report published by The Sloan Consortium shows that between Fall 2007 and Fall 2008, the number of students taking at least one online course rose 17%, or to over 4.6 million students [5]. Although this growth represents an overall look at online learning in the United States, similar trends can be found in graduate education.

The majority of students enrolling in online graduate degree programs are non-traditional students who have external commitments including full-time employment and family and, although some of them may live within close proximity of their institution of choice, many live a significant distance from the nearest degree granting institution. As stated in Wyatt [9], “Online instruction is appealing to a specific type of student, many of whom cannot take traditional courses and others who do take traditional courses but prefer online courses because of family responsibilities, work schedules, distance from campus and the like” (p. 469). Likewise, Braun [4] in his study of perceptions and attitudes of online graduate students found that the second most frequent response to his survey question about the reasons behind students enrolling in online courses was flexibility and the third most frequent response was the ability to do course work at home. All of the participants in Braun’s study held full-time teaching positions where multitasking and time management are necessary for successful experiences. Student desire for the flexibility online courses can provide, and their struggle with graduate school attendance while engaging in fulltime employment is not new. This quandary is also reflected in older publications. For example, Thomas [10] published an article in Educuse Quarterly in which he states that an estimated five of six online students are employed and would not be able to attend traditional classes.

The literature revealed similar motivational factors toward online program enrollment outside the United States. Edmonds [6], in her study of online graduate student of the University of Calgary, found that survey respondents felt “online learning proved to be a convenient and flexible way to pursue higher education” (p. 166). Flexibility in pursuing graduate studies was necessary for them to be capable of balancing the non-graduate school related responsibilities in their lives. Participants in the study indicated that these non-graduate school related responsibilities hindered their ability to attend traditional, on-campus post-secondary classes. Similar motivational factors were revealed in a study of Japanese MBA student at Nihon University. More than 170 online MBA students were surveyed, addressing questions regarding motivation and learning goals. Conclusions from the survey data included: people who decided to enter the program were busy business persons in their working prime who required the flexibility since Japanese people prioritize family life and pursuing an advanced degree online serves as an important role model for family members [11].

Several studies addressed the career advancement factor associated with graduate student online enrollment. Edmonds [6] and Bocci et al. [3] found that career advancement and improving workplace skills were critical factors to the decision process associated with enrolling in an online program. “Two [career] related reasons were
career advancement, and increasing workplace skills and knowledge” [6, p. 145]. Participants, with their careers in mind, set goals to advance their position, while those desiring only to update their skills were concerned mostly with keeping their jobs [6]. Similarly, Devi (as cited in Bocchi et al., 2004) found that “the rapid pace of technological changes makes it necessary for adults to continuously upgrade their knowledge and skills to stay competitive in the job market” (p. 246). Payne and Johnson [5] noted that, “participants reported a variety of plans for using their degrees. These plans include meeting critical professional development goals, increasing salaries, and starting a new career” (p. 125). Additionally, in the same study, one participant was quoted saying, “I am primarily pursuing the program for personal growth, but it will also give me additional credibility within my industry” (p.125).

C. Online Enrollment and Hesitation

While online programs can provide increased flexibility to their enrollees, the attrition rates in online programs are generally higher than in traditional, on-campus programs. Terry [12] found that Web-based courses have higher attrition rates than the more traditional face-to-face on-campus courses. Though online courses appear to be an attractive option for many students as evidenced by high enrollment numbers, lack of instructor immediacy, personal contact, and understanding of student barriers in the online environment seem to contribute to a higher attrition rate [8, 13, 14]. Willaging and Johnson [14] conducted a study at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign investigating why master’s students dropped out, when they dropped out and the factors that could predict if a student was pre-inclined to drop out. The study found that attrition was high across the three cohorts studied, ranging from 27.3% to 44.1%. The average dropout percentage across the three cohorts was 33.7%. Those who dropped out left after completion of the first few courses, and no dominant reason for dropping out was found. While none of these factors were dominant, some forces influencing students to drop out included financial difficulties, lack of time, family problems, difficulties with full-time work and online course work, difficulty completing course work, technical issues, and lack of program rigor.

Several parallels were found between factors influencing hesitation to enroll and factors influencing attrition. Financial concerns, concern about rigor, and concerns revolving around technology were present in both groups. Online learning may appear intimidating to potential enrollees, as illustrated by these words, from a student who dropped out of an online graduate program: “I honestly had no idea what I was doing when I meant online learning: [6, p. 157].

The technology factor in online programs can prove intimidating to students who feel their technology skills are not sufficient to participate in technology-facilitated education. Skill perceptions aside, some potential students also fear that technology is becoming too much of a focus when teaching online. Cynthia White [8] said that “with all the focus on new technologies and course development, relatively little attention is being paid to the realities of student encounters and the gaps and barriers they run into in their wider experience within institutions” (p. 175).

In speaking of technology, its mediating effect upon human contact and interaction is also a common theme in the literature revolving around online teaching and learning. White [8] found that the intentions of distance education have been to provide educational opportunity to a larger audience whose roles and responsibilities outside of the institution and also “to find ways of being responsive to the circumstances and needs of individual learners” (p. 165). The feeling of presence can be difficult to achieve in an online course, as classmates and instructors may be physically located in different locations.

In attempting to address this physical and social disconnect between students and instructor, Thomas [10] cited Gunawardena and Zittle’s research of the relationship between online students and their instructors, finding that “social presence, or ‘teacher immediacy,’ was a strong predictor of participant satisfaction in the virtual environment, just as it was in face-to-face instruction” (p. 45). Thomas further cited a study on distance student dropout rates by Brown, who found that “67.7% of the students who dropped out cited ‘difficulty in contacting their tutors and insufficient support from them [as] major contributing factors in their decision” (p. 45).

D. Summary

While online graduate education aims to reach a broader audience and accommodate students with hectic schedules and greater external pressures than those seen in traditional, on campus undergraduate students, the technology and teaching methods can, in some cases, work against this objective. Online graduate programs garner larger enrollment but suffer from higher attrition rates, warranting a look at why students choose the online option and what their expectations and perceptions are in order to inform instructional design practices that aim to retain these virtual students.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the current study is to better understand the motivations of graduate students to pursue a degree and to learn online. An online survey was chosen to facilitate a quick turnaround and convenient access to our dispersed population who were already accustomed to an online medium. While employing an online survey does not give us a rich personal perspective from each student individually, it does allow us to collect valuable data more efficiently from which we can make some broad generalizations about why graduate students choose an online program. The survey was built using iContact, an online marketing communications application. Students are familiar with receiving communications from the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology through the system, and the application allowed the researchers to track data and responses easily. The survey contained 17 questions, which addressed both demographic and observational responses.

Our population was a convenience sample, as one of the researchers is the educational program coordinator for the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology at Michigan State University (MSU) where students are enrolled in two online master's programs. Single stage sampling was used on all of the 85 students currently enrolled in the two programs. Each student received an email invitation to
participate and informed consent was indicated by reading the statement and clicking the link to continue with the survey. According to the reports from iContact, 39 of the recipients opened the email and 20 chose to complete the survey. According to the reports from iContact, 39 of the recipients opened the email and 20 chose to complete the survey. All but one participant answered every question, so all 20 responses were used to conduct independent sample t-tests.

Our focus was on the overarching research question considering the role non-cognitive variables play in the selection of an online graduate program. We chose gender, age, and longevity in the program as independent variables for conducting the t-tests. There are three main aspects that our survey questions highlighted; the extent to which convenience, future goals and institutional perception impacts a student’s selection of an online graduate program. Survey questions 5-7, 12, 14 and 15 correspond to the convenience aspect of program selection. Questions 8, 13 and 16 focused on the impact of employment and future goals in relation to their choice of program. With regard to institutional perception, questions 9-11 and 17 address personal connection to MSU, program prestige, interaction with others in field, methodology used for researching programs.

V. FINDINGS

Of the students who completed the survey, 11 were male and nine were female. Eighteen of the respondents were employed full time, two were employed part-time and none indicated that they were refraining from employment to be full-time students. The racial makeup of responses included 75% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 5% Asian, 10% Hispanic/Latino and 5% undisclosed. Half of the students were between the ages of 26 and 34, a quarter of them were between the ages of 35 and 40, 15% were between the ages of 18 and 25, and 10% were between the ages of 41 and 60. For the purposes of data analysis, we combined these age groups into variables that included individuals who are 18-34, 35-60. We also collected data on the amount of time students had spent in the program; eight of the respondents had been in the program a maximum of one semester or less, the remaining 12 have been enrolled for more than one semester. An independent sample t-test for this variable yielded little significance between the groups who had been in the program for just a short time and those who had been enrolled longer, so we chose not to focus our analysis and discussion on longevity in the program.

Independent-sample t-tests were conducted using SPSS to compare the dependent variables for males and females and respondent age groups of 18-34 and 35-60 years old. T-tests were chosen as the statistical test based on the group comparison nature of our research and number of the independent and dependent variables used as categorical data in our sampling. For both independent variables, there was an overall significant difference between mean scores of the dependent variables, measured by the Significant (two-tailed) measurement. Overall, the magnitude of the differences in the means was very large for the gender variable (eta squared = .24) and for the age variable (eta squared = .30). Results for each specific research question break down the items on the survey and the mean scores.

Analysis of data was grouped into three main categories of convenience, goals, and institutional perception as general factors that influence student selection of an online graduate program.

A. Convenience

Questions regarding convenience included: respondents choice of an online MS program because it would be easier than a face-to-face program or if they prefer online learning to face-to-face classes, if an online MS program fit better with work and family responsibilities, personal financial considerations, and if life commitments outside of course work affect their ability to operate successfully in the program. Each question was compared in relation to age and gender. The analysis of t-tests conducted for gender indicate that males (M=3.73, SD=1.10) more strongly than females (M= 3.67, SD=1.41) disagree that they chose an online MS program because it was easier than a face-to-face program. In terms of age, 18-34 year old respondents (M=3.31, SD=1.31) were more likely to be neutral in their response to this question and 35-60 year old respondents (M=4.43, SD=0.54) were more likely to disagree. Overall, participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that they chose an online MS program because they thought it would be easier than a face-to-face program.

Males (Work: M=1.09, SD=.30; Family: M=1.55, SD=.52) felt more strongly than females (Work: M=1.56, SD=.72; Family: M=1.89, SD=.78) that an online MS fit into their work responsibilities and family responsibilities. In terms of age, the results were different for these two questions, showing that 18-34 year old respondents (M=1.23, SD=0.43) were more likely to strongly agree than 35-60 year old respondents (M=1.43, SD=.43) that an online program fit well with their work responsibilities. Opposite of these results, 18-34 age group (M=1.77, SD=0.72) were less likely than the 35-60 age group (M=1.57, SD=0.53) to agree that online MS fits into family responsibilities. Overall, survey results show that a majority of respondents strongly agree that the online MS fit with their work responsibilities. Similarly, the results show that respondents agree that an online MS fit into their family responsibilities. No respondents’ chose disagree or strongly disagree with these two variables.

Neither males (M=3.45, SD=0.82) nor females (M=3.33, SD=1.00) had a strong indication that they agreed or disagreed with the question regarding a preference for online learning. Both age groups (18-34: M=3.15, SD=0.80; 35-60: M=3.86, SD=0.90) were likely to be neutral or disagree that they had a preference for online learning. The survey overall reported that respondents were neutral or disagreed with this variable with a small percentage agreeing or strongly disagreeing.

In response to the question regarding financial considerations (such as tuition waivers, reimbursements, etc.) as a driving factor in their choice of the program, males (M=2.82, SD=1.25) were more likely to agree or be neutral with their response than females (M=3.56, SD=1.59), who were more likely to be neutral or
disagree. In regard to the age variable, 35-60 year old respondents (M=3.71, SD=1.380) were more likely to disagree regarding financial considerations and 18-34 year old respondents (M=2.85, SD=1.405) were more likely to be neutral or agree. Overall, the responses were equally neutral or in disagreement with the next most common response being strongly disagree, followed by strongly agree and lastly agree.

The question regarding life commitments outside of course work and their affect on respondents’ ability to operate successfully in the program produced neutral results for both the gender and age variable. Males (M=3.18, SD=1.250) and females (M=2.89, SD=1.364) had some variance in the results, while 18-34 year old respondents (M=3.08, SD=1.382) and 35-60 year old respondents (M=3.00, SD=1.155) were decidedly neutral. The survey results overall showed that the largest percentage disagreed with the question, neutral and agreement responses were the same percent, as were strongly agree and strongly disagree.

B. Goals

Questions that factored program completion within the required amount of time, whether or not the program was required for future goals, and the perception of the ability of the program to increase research competence were grouped under the category of “goals”.

In terms of the necessity of the program to achieve future goals, a majority of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that this was a significant factor in their program decision. Females (M=2.00, SD=1.32) were more likely than males (M=1.73, SD=0.65) to agree that this influenced their decision-making process. The younger students surveyed (M=1.69, SD=0.95) were more likely to agree than their older counterparts (M= 2.14, SD=1.07) that the necessity for future goals influenced their decision to enroll.

Males (M=1.64, SD=0.67) more strongly agreed than females (M=2.00, SD=1.5) with the choice of the online MS based on the potential that it would increase their research competence. Both age groups (18-34: M=1.62, SD=0.87, 35-60; M=2.14, SD=1.46) agree about the opportunity of increasing research competence, although 35-60 year-olds submitted more neutral responses. In general, all but three respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the potential for an increase in research competence influenced their decision-making process.

Females (M=1.00, SD=0.00) were more likely to agree than males (M=1.36, SD=0.51) that they will finish the program in the required deadline. In terms of age groups, younger students (M=1.00, SD=0.00) were more likely to strongly agree than older (M= 1.57, SD=0.54) that they will finish program within the required deadline. Overall, an overwhelming percentage of students strongly agree (80%) or agree (20%) that they will finish the program in a timely manner.

C. Institutional Perception

We categorized questions that asked about respondents’ connection to MSU, the program’s prestige in the field and how the program would afford them the ability to interact with others in the field as “institutional perception.” Each survey question was compared in relation to age and gender.

Overall, most respondents disagreed that a personal connection to MSU was a factor in their decision to enroll in the online graduate program. When considering gender, males (M=3.00, SD=1.41) felt less strongly than females (M=2.78, SD=1.39) that the connection with MSU influenced their choice of the online MS program. In terms of age, older students (M=3.71, SD=0.95) were more likely to disagree than their younger counterparts (M=2.46, SD=1.39) who were more neutral about their personal connection to MSU as an influencing factor in their program selection.

Neither females (M= 2.78, SD=0.67) nor males (M= 2.64, SD= 1.12) indicated that the program’s reputation in the field strongly influenced their decision to choose the online graduate program. Both age groups (18-34; M=2.62, SD=.77, 35-60; M=2.86, SD=1.22) were likely to agree or be neutral about their program choice due to the perceived prestige of the program. This is consistent with the overall results for this question in which 80% of the respondents either agreed or were neutral about the program’s prestige as a factor in their decision-making process.

In general, responses were split relatively equally among those who agreed, were neutral or disagreed that their choice of online graduate program was based on the opportunity that it would provide them to interact with other professionals in the field. Females (M=3.22, SD=.83) were more likely than males (M=2.30, SD=1.16) to disagree with the statement that this factor influenced their decision. Both age groups (18-34: M=2.67, SD=1.07, 35-60; M=2.86, SD=1.22) were likely to agree or be neutral in their agreement with the statement about choosing the online MS for interaction with others in field.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Convenience

When it comes to convenience, these data confirm our Bean and Metzner-based hypothesis that environmental variables have a stronger influence on a prospective student’s choice to select the online MS than other variables. All demographic groups in this study indicate that the online MS is easier to fit into their work responsibilities, with males slightly more likely to agree. Family considerations surrounding the online MS are more of a concern to the 18-34 year old students, perhaps due to their increased likelihood of having small children, but overall, students believe that the program addressed their convenience needs. These findings coincide with previous studies discussed in the literature review [4, 6, 9, 10, 11,] which report that online instruction is appealing to a specific type of non-traditional student who must take into consideration the convenience of online instruction to fit with their family and work responsibilities. According to this study, financial considerations are not a significant factor in students’ choice to enroll in the online MS, challenging Edmonds’ [6] findings that financial concerns were a source of
hesitation to enroll. Additionally, no preference for online learning as a delivery mechanism was found, with most respondents being neutral or in disagreement with the question. These data on convenience show that the establishment of the flexible program parameters of an asynchronous online MS provides confirms Tinto’s [1] work regarding impact on persistence.

B. Goals

Regarding future goals, and based upon the work of Tinto [1] as well as Bean and Metzner [2], it is not surprising that an important influencing factor is that all students who responded thought that the program was necessary to achieve future goals. This finding is consistent with Wyatt [9], Edmonds [6], [3], and [5], as outlined in the literature review. Furthermore, women and younger students surveyed believe that future goals are especially important in their decision-making process. This factor could also explain why women and the younger group of students more strongly agree that they were confident they would complete the program within the necessary time frame. All students who responded had a very positive outlook about program completion, but it is possible to speculate that students who may be struggling in the program or are uncertain about the possibility of finishing successfully would be less likely to participate in the survey at all.

While increasing research competence is somewhat more influential to the male participants, overall, it is also an important factor in students’ decision-making within the realm of the goals category also. We posit that this relates to the academic, psychological, and social integration factors outlined by Tinto and Bean and Metzner.

C. Institutional Perception

Overall, students’ perception of MSU, and the personal connection to the institution plays virtually no role in the choice to enroll in the online MS. However, the online MS program’s prestige in the field did factor into students’ selection process, with 42% agreeing with the statement “I chose the online MS because of the program’s prestige in the field.” This finding differs from the literature review where it was reported that Edmonds [6] found that participants worried the degree from an online program would be seen as less valid than a traditional on-campus degree.

Another area in which our findings differ from the literature review is student perception of the online MS as isolating or disconnected. Our findings show that 67% of respondents agreed or are neutral regarding the statement “I chose the online MS to meet and interact with others in my field.” This challenges the findings of Gunawardena & Zittle [13], White [8], and Willaging & Johnson [14] that claim students fear isolation or lack of immediacy in online course offerings, instigating hesitation to enroll.

D. Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The results of this survey research on the student perspective and motivation to choose an online MS program can be used to inform program directors and prepare faculty to better understand the factors that have an influence on students entering their program. Key desires include flexibility, the opportunity to interact with other professionals in the field, and the ability to gain research experience. In addition, concerns about student understanding and navigation of online instructional technology delivery methods often overshadow the attention being paid to other student encounters within the institution in relation to their work and family responsibilities. While courses are delivered online, other student services such as advising, billing, career fairs, and social gatherings are centered on traditional residential students and their ability to attend during the normal business day. Likewise, faculty preparedness is important in order to understand these factors and the influence they have on student ability to balance course load and seek help. Although these are important non-cognitive variables in student motivations, understanding the importance of finishing the degree within the required time limit and long term career goals, could guide stakeholders like faculty and program directors to focus on factors that impact students the most in the pursuit of finishing their online graduate degree.

REFERENCES


AUTHORS

Patricia L. Banyas is with Virtual University, Design and Technology, Michigan State University (e-mail: banyaspa@msu.edu).

Terri M. Gustafson is with the College of Education, Center for Teaching and Technology, Michigan State University (e-mail: terrigus@msu.edu).

Jessica L. Knott is with TechSmith Corporation (e-mail: jlknot@gmail.com).

Manuscript submitted April 1, 2011
Published as submitted by the author(s).
### APPENDIX A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Questions</th>
<th>Bean and Metzner Variables</th>
<th>Tinto Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Background &amp; Defining</td>
<td>Aca dem ic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Environ men tal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Psyc holo gica l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Out com es</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Inte gration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>At tri b u tes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Entr y Orie n tations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Institutional Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Inte grati on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographics (gender, race, age, etc.)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because I thought it would be easier than a face-to-face program</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because it better fit into my work responsibilities</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because it better fit into my family responsibilities</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because it was in necessary for my future goals</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because I feel a personal connection to Michigan State University</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because of the program’s prestige in the field</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS to meet and interact with others in my field</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS because I prefer learning online to learning in person</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS to increase my competence in research</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I chose the online MS based on financial considerations (such as tuition waivers, reimbursements, etc.)</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your methodology for researching programs? What tools and resources did you use? Choose all that apply.</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life commitments outside of course work do not affect my ability to operate successfully in the program</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I expect to finish the MS program within the required five-year deadline.</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>