

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSFORMATIONAL OUTCOMES FOR
WOMEN EARNING AN ONLINE DEGREE

A Dissertation

by

MARTHA GAIL WEATHERLY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2007

Major Subject: Educational Human Resource Development

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Toby Marshall Egan
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ABSTRACT

Personal Development and Transformational Outcomes
for Women Earning an Online Degree. (December 2007)

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This qualitative study was designed to investigate the changes that occurred in the lives of women as a result of earning a fully online master's degree. Eighteen women were asked to describe why they chose to earn an online degree, what barriers they faced in trying to gain an education and advance professionally, how their lives changed as a result of earning the degree, and whether the outcomes met or surpassed their expectations.

Constant comparative and narrative analysis of interview data revealed that women who overcame barriers and resistance to their pursuit of education experienced a range of benefits from earning the online degree. Benefits encompassed personal gains in self-confidence, respect, the strength to be a role model, and professional gains such as new career opportunities, connectedness in a professional community, and credibility among peers. Participants reported the online environment uniquely connected them to a more diverse group of peers, provided greater access to instructors and peers, offered highly valued anonymity, introduced them to a more engaged form of learning, and created a safe learning environment. Online learning emphasized students' writing,

reflection, articulation, timely feedback from the facilitator, caring and respect for students, and effective communication.

Participants shared that earning the degree had a “domino effect” that led others to emulate their behavior, and some experienced relationship changes. Significantly, several of the women had a transformational learning experience that included: (1) an unexpected discovery leading to heightened personal awareness that resulted from the learning experience; (2) an openness to change and the process of becoming; (3) a willingness to overcome internal or external resistance in order to redefine self; and (4) a retrospective affirmation of altered personality and identity. Participants suggested women still face discrimination in their professional lives, making advanced degrees more critical for women. They recommended that institutions of higher education provide more advanced online degree programs for the benefit of women who have a variety of other demands placed on their lives as they strive to attain their personal and professional goals. Implications and recommendations for future research and policy changes are provided.

DEDICATION

To my grandchildren, who inspired me to persist,
to my husband, who modeled a fervor for education and a talent for goal-setting,
to the late Reverend Jimmy Hardy, whose memory sustains me every day,
to Dr. Michael Sullivan, mentor, advisor, and instructor who epitomizes an ethic of care,
to Dr. Toby Marshall Egan, chair, friend, who is gifted in maximizing the potential of
others,
to my parents, who define success as honor and integrity,
and to my children, my daughter-in-law, and my sons-in-law, whom I love dearly.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Toby Marshall Egan, and my committee members, Dr. Kim Dooley, Dr. Larry Dooley, and Dr. Christine Stanley, for their guidance and support throughout the course of this research. Dr. Egan talked with me via telephone and email and in person many times, and he always epitomized kindness, patience, and foresight in his academic advice and leadership. I will always be grateful for his assistance.

I also want to extend my gratitude to the women who volunteered for this study. They shared their varied experiences of earning an online degree, and, in the process of doing so, became an inspiration to me and to others.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to my friends and peers in higher education. Their words of encouragement motivated me when unforeseen events threatened to postpone my forward progress.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Could you please tell me what classes are offered online because I am married with two kids unable to attend classes on campus. I would like to go back to school and get into a good career. Please just let me know what classes I can take to get a degree. So I can do something with my life. I feel like I have thrown my life away but I never regret having my two precious kids. They are what make the world a better place. (Anonymous, 2005)

As distance education coordinator at a public four-year institution, I regularly receive email messages from women seeking online degrees. One of those messages, which is shown above, captures the essence of the majority – women torn between their role of caregiver and their desire to gain knowledge and skills through the acquisition of a higher educational degree and, as a result, provide greater stability to their families. I empathize with each of these women. Education seemed a long, arduous journey for me. I spent eleven years earning a bachelor's degree, collecting credit hours from three different institutions located in cities associated with my husband's professional and educational pursuits. I had my third child, a son, mid-way through a semester in the year prior to completing my bachelor's degree in journalism, and the professor allowed me

The style and format of this dissertation will follow that of the *Adult Education Quarterly*.

two weeks off. Once, while attending a night class in my ninth month of pregnancy, a male classmate glowered at me and said, “Why don’t you just go home and take care of your children?” Before I could formulate a response, a young woman sitting at the same table unleashed a torrent of corrective words on the man. I was grateful for her defense since I was acutely aware of being a non-traditional student at a small, private university, and I felt odd just being there. I knew the female instructor of the class would offer no support; she exhibited an open hostility towards me, making this class particularly inhospitable. After my son was born, I resumed attending classes and balanced the care of three small children. My husband held a full-time and two part-time jobs during the time I was attending school, so he was unaware of who kept our children when I went to class, and he was rarely home in the evenings. At the commencement in December 1982, I was so exhausted as I received my diploma that the memory of that event continues to invoke feelings quite remote from joy. I was not the jovial, foot-loose-and-fancy-free graduate; I was the non-traditional female student, 29 years old, who had somehow balanced the roles of mother and student in order to earn a degree.

One year later, my family relocated to a small, rural town where my husband established his professional practice as a veterinarian, and from that moment my goal of earning a master’s degree in educational technology seemed impossible. Like many women, I found myself living in a geographic region that limited access to the degree I sought. I had young, school-aged children, and I was employed full time. Since my first concern was for my family, I placed my educational goal of earning a master’s degree to

the side. I began teaching 9th grade English at the local high school then moved into technology related roles in education, and for seventeen years I waited.

It was in the fall of 1999 that I learned a master's degree in educational technology was being offered fully online by a reputable, respected, and accredited university. I made arrangements immediately to enroll. In August 1999, only two months after beginning the program, my oldest daughter gave birth to a son who had multiple and life-threatening disabilities. I remember frantically emailing my advisor to say I would be forced to drop out of the program due to the crisis in my family. I was amazed by the return email I received. "Let the distance work for you," he said. "Take care of your family, then return to the class." I sat at my desk and wept. For the first time in my life, higher education demonstrated extraordinary compassion and flexibility. This level of compassion motivated me to continue my studies.

My family managed to adjust to the ongoing crisis, and I was able to remain in that course and ultimately complete the program. Guided by a mentor who epitomized an ethic of care, I ultimately developed a love of online learning and began to feel I might be capable of continuing my education beyond the master's level and share a similar level of encouragement with others struggling to fulfill their educational goals. I entered the program expecting only to gain the skills I needed in my job. I also admit that I entered with an ontological view of the world that had been largely shaped by an androcentric, dominant culture. However, midway through master's program, I began to recognize transformational changes taking place within myself; I realized the most valuable benefits of my educational journey were related to *becoming* rather than *being*,

searching out my own soul through the process and the struggle, and knowing an inner triumph that had little to do with the tangible results often labeled by others as evidence of success. I could not put a singular value on the strong, confident person I had become, the person who now relied upon a voice within for affirmation and direction rather than being swayed and pushed by forces without, the person who was now eager to embrace new philosophies rather than put up a defense to protect the old ones. The master's degree gave me access to more education, heightened self-confidence, determination, and, ultimately, an expanded view of life.

In December 2001, I traveled five hours to attend the commencement exercises, and I sat with hundreds of people in an auditorium listening to the commencement speaker, a small Hispanic woman barely visible above the podium, as she described her life-long struggle for an education. She was the daughter of migrant workers who had worked odd jobs to pay for an education. She told of earning her bachelor's and master's degrees, and then going on to earn a doctorate from Harvard. At a reception following the commencement, I asked her if I should consider earning a doctorate degree. "Never stop," she said quietly. "Never stop." That supportive statement convinced me I needed to strive for a doctorate degree so that one day I could tell another woman, "Never stop. Never stop."

I enrolled in a Ph.D. program in educational human resource development only eight months after completing the online master's degree, and my goal in entering the program was to contribute to the body of knowledge related to women in online learning. I became increasingly eager to ask other women how their lives had been

affected by earning an online degree. Why did they choose an online degree? What changes did they experience as a result of earning an online degree? Did earning the online degree inspire them to seek education even beyond the master's level? What opportunities came their way as a result of earning an online degree?

As I completed my research and prepared to write the dissertation, my committee chair introduced me to heuristic research methodology (Moustakas, 1990) and heuristic self-search inquiry research methodology (Sela-Smith, 2002). These research methods placed emphasis on the researcher's tacit knowledge and experience. I was, therefore, able to link my experiences of earning an online degree with the experiences of the participants in the study. In fact, I now feel my having earned an online degree was an unspoken prerequisite to being given access to the highly personal information shared by these women. They often asked if I had earned an online degree, and when I said yes, they usually began sharing with me information I feel certain they would not have divulged had I not proven my credibility. There was almost a physical nod of approval that I was allowed to be there asking them questions about their personal experiences. They were eager to share with me at that point because I was able to say, "I truly understand what you experienced because I had the same experience." One of the women said to me at the conclusion of our interview, "I don't want to lose you." I felt the same about each and every one of these extraordinary women. As they shared and I listened, a bond and kinship sprang up between us. Each one expressed a desire to stay in contact with me because I was genuinely interested in what they had accomplished by earning an online degree, and I truly understood the measure of change the degree had

brought to their lives. Another said to me, “I think you could only understand this if you had been through it yourself.” I had to agree, and I was thankful for research methodology that was far removed from the survey instrument designed to maintain a significant distance between the researcher and sample population. Instead, I became a member of the study, sharing my own non-traditional path through higher education, and this involvement required my own participation, my own disclosure, and my own vulnerability. The heuristic methods opened doors that might otherwise have remained closed to those seeking personal perspectives of women in online learning.

The Need for In-depth Study of Women in Online Learning

Historically, women have been constrained in their professional progress by expectations that they, more so than men, must prove their performance capabilities in order to advance (Bierema, 2001; Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Cunningham, 2006; Euben, 2001; Martin, 2000; Noe, 2002). Martin (2000) noted an example:

The members of a philosophy department at a U.S. university participated in this same shady practice when they demanded that the leading female candidate for a position in ethics demonstrate mastery of the history of philosophy but placed no such requirement on the man still in the running. (p. 92)

Furthermore, women, who are not groomed to be assertive and competitive, may find themselves viewed in an unfavorable light for not being so when engaging in the academic arena. Martin (2000) added:

In the case I remember best, a woman's unassertive demeanor was automatically interpreted as philosophical incompetence and her hesitant speech patterns as intellectual confusion. (p. 93)

Online education offers a growing number of women the opportunity to fulfill personal educational goals and attain credentials needed for professional advancement (Carnevale, 2002; Kramarae, 2001). The online environment is also perceived by women learners as being a safer environment (Sullivan, 2002); yet, there is insufficient research documenting the personal and professional change in the lives of women who earned fully online degrees. Despite indications that women are pursuing online degrees in growing numbers (Carnevale, 2002), elaboration regarding the outcomes for women who earned an online degree is lacking (von Prummer, 2000).

The need to know more about women who have enrolled and completed online degree programs was the impetus for this study. Gaining answers to these questions required conversing with women who had earned a fully online degree, and it also required providing these women an opportunity to share in depth their unique individual experiences. The heuristic research method (Moustakas, 1990), which requires "the investigator to have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated" (p. 14), was adopted. Moustakas (1990) contrasted heuristic research with phenomenological research and noted, "whereas phenomenology encourages a kind of detachment from the phenomenon being investigated, heuristics emphasizes connectedness and relationship" (p. 38).

This study was conducted to better understand the phenomenon of personal development and transformation associated with women who are motivated to balance the responsibilities of life, family, and employment in order to seek an advanced educational degree available to them only because the degree was offered online. This research was conducted to explore the expectations of women as they began an online degree as compared to the perceived outcomes of the earned degree, and also the importance these women associated with the opportunity to earn an online degree. This study resonates with my own voice and the voices of other women who feel strongly about access to higher education. For their own personal reasons, each of these women sought and completed an online degree, overcame barriers along the way, and ultimately reached their educational goals. Their experiences are not generalized to a vast audience; their experiences are offered for individual interpretation; however, what is gleaned from this study may mirror the experience of many women in distance learning contexts.

Women's Unique Perspectives in Online Education

As I began researching women earning an online degree, I discovered the article, "The Third Shift," based upon a study by the American Association of University Women (Kramarae, 2001) which involved interviews with more than 500 women engaged in online education. Participants in the study confirmed the barriers to educational access routinely confronted by women (Kramarae, 2001). Another breakthrough came in 2004 when I met Dr. Christine von Prummer, head of the evaluation unit of the Center for the Development of Distance Education at the German FernUniversitat, who has researched

gender issues in distance education for over twenty years. I was greatly influenced by von Prummer's (2000) book, *Women and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities*, and, with her guidance, was introduced to a body of research related to women in distance education not only in Germany but also in the Open University in England (Heron, 1997; Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990; Lunneborg, 1994). Others who particularly influenced my understanding of gender issues in distance education were Barrett and Lally (1999), Burke (2001), Furst-Bowe and Dittman (2001), Gouthro (2005), Halio (2004), and Sullivan (2002). I began learning from this collective body of research that women in distance education "are more interested in interpersonal contacts with other students and with staff members" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 82) and that "behavior and learning styles which are different from that of men are usually seen as being on a lower level of intellectual and moral development" (von Prummer, 2000, p. 83). von Prummer (2000) noted that Gilligan's (1982) book, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, as well as the book by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, supplied the theoretical framework for her understanding of the gender differences in the "participation of women in distance education, the underrepresentation of women students in Germany, as well as the differences in study behavior and learning styles in both countries" (p. 82). von Prummer (2000) added:

They provide a frame of reference which does not measure women by a male standard of which, almost inevitably, they must fall short. The discovery that women develop in different ways from men allows us to accept the validity of

their experience and to start looking into the previously neglected question of how distance education systems can serve the needs of women students. (pp. 84-85)

Kirkup (1996) further explained in light of theoretical models examining gender:

This connected way of being for women comes, it is argued [by Gilligan] out of a life in which one's relationships with others are a crucial part of personal development. It is a positive way of being rather than an immature state on the road to 'separation' or 'independence' which is how it was previously described. Belenky et al. (1986) . . . describe women as 'connected knowers' who, when they reach the highest stages of intellectual development, *equivalent* to but not the *same* as those described by Perry, continue to exhibit a strong sense of relatedness to others. Something lacking in men at the same stage. (p. 151)

Burge (1998) summarized related findings:

Distance education discussions about women's learning add to the already large body of research into women's learning in 'traditional' walled classrooms,...into the preferred relational styles of many women learners (compared to the autonomous styles preferred by many men learners), and the ways in which women come to know what they know....We can expect that when helping many women to make a successful comeback into higher education and develop learning to learn skills, we have to focus less on the three "R's" of receive, retain, and return, and more on respect, re-frame and re-apply, so that the relevant knowledge is generated and used. (p. 32)

Women seeking an education bring with them a worldview that is entwined with their “*lifeworld*; the place of everyday existence...in which all human experience is grounded” (Gouthro, 2005, p. 5). For women, participation in education may be coordinated around domestic and childrearing responsibilities, they may have little self-esteem and confidence, and they may experience internal conflict about being a “mother and being a student or academic” (Gouthro, 2005, p. 8). Women often bear an unfair domestic burden at home (Gouthro, 2005; Heron, 1997; von Prummer, 2000), and may experience “lack of support or even violence from non-supportive partners” (Gouthro, 2005, p. 9). Women are ultimately held responsible for their children’s behavior and are expected to provide adequate support at home “so that their children will do well in school, and they are judged negatively if they fail to do so” (Gouthro, 2005, p. 10). Furthermore, for many women, academia may result in a transformation that leads to alienation. Gouthro (2005), suggested “women and members of minorities who become immersed in academia sometimes experience an identity transformation that creates a sense of alienation” (p. 11). Martin (2000) noted that the “aerial distance, the esoteric language, and the devaluation of the practical” (p. 132) that is common to academia may contribute to the sense of alienation experienced by women who engage in formal learning.

Heron (1997) conducted interviews with 64 women at the British Open University (OU) and gained insight into the women’s experiences of “becoming and being OU students, and change as a result; their perceptions of change in their learning experience, expectations and outcomes, and of the contribution of the student support

services in this” (p. 4). In her study, Heron (1997) unveiled many of the built-in assumptions about women. For example, she pointed out that many people feel the isolation of home study outweighs and is preferable to that of shared learning. She found another common belief is that there is only one model of adult learning. Heron said another misconception is that women have a natural affinity with only certain academic areas. These false assumptions, Heron noted, conflict with the reality of what women face when seeking an education, such as the following:

- women’s other responsibilities often mean that time is most likely to be fragmented, demanding of immediate response and “spare time” is something of a myth. Personal circumstances may be exclusive of physical space for study.
- even where women are in a “double load scenario” (of external and internal employment), they will bear most of the housekeeping and caring responsibilities, and they often continue to do so even when they “triple load” by entering studentship.
- Kirkup (Open University) and von Prummer (FernUniversitat) (1990) found that women feel a need to set compensatory strictures on their domestic roles.
- study may, in fact, result in conflict. Women who attempt to realize their personal ambitions through education may have to bear personal costs of conflict with people on whom they depend for personal and financial support.

(p. 13)

Caught between commitments to their families and their jobs, women often choose to forego completing an education. Vezina (1998) found that female graduate students put

off having children to avoid managing academic and home responsibilities. Wilson (2003), in "The Chronicle of Higher Education," reported on a study conducted to find if there is a good time for women in academe to have children:

Mary Ann Mason, dean of the graduate studies at the University of California dubbed her project: "Do Babies Matter?" It is based on data collected until 1999 by the federal government from 160,000 people who earned their doctorates between 1978 and 1984. She says she wanted "to address the question...women graduate students always ask, 'Is there a good time to have a baby?'" (p. A1)

"The answer was never...women who have children early in their career are less likely to be successful in gaining tenure, and women who defer having children often end up not having them at all" (Gouthro, 2005, p. 11). If academe is expected to change education to be more conducive to women, the challenge is immense because the evidence clearly indicates children delay tenure and promotion of women in academe.

Joan C. Williams, director of the Program on WorkLife Law at American University, says academe is still based on a model in which men worked and their wives stayed at home with the children. "This is a job structure that systematically excludes mothers," she says. "It shows that so long as we continue to identify the ideal academic worker as someone who works full time, 60 hours a week for 40 years straight -- surprise! -- that will overwhelmingly be men." (Wilson, 2003, p. A1)

With these kinds of influences on the academic environment which ultimately shapes educational opportunities for women and the minds of those women as they ponder the

pros and cons of seeking an education, a tremendous challenge is issued to researchers and educators to avoid silencing “those whose lives have led them to fundamentally different perspectives of the world” (Litner, Rossiter & Taylor, 1992, p. 287). According to Gouthro (2005), “Developing curriculum and teaching practices that incorporate feminist and inclusive teaching perspectives helps to address some of these issues” (p. 15).

As more women enter online education, will they find learning environments conducive to their learning styles, learning contexts, and preference for relational learning? von Prummer’s (2000) research found that the German distance education system:

caters to the ‘autonomous’ and ‘independent’ learner who more or less happily studies on his own, working his way through the course materials provided by the university. Ideally, this student has *chosen* to study at a distance and does not want to be bothered with personal contacts and demands for attendance or interaction. There tends to be a feeling that any student requiring more attention – in the form of tutorial support, face-to-face interaction or other forms of personal contact – is somewhat lacking in those traits which characterize the successful distance student. It is not a slip of the tongue that I speak of this ideal-type distance student as ‘he’ . . . on the basis of comparative data we [von Prummer and Kirkup] have reached the conclusion that the German FeU provides fewer opportunities for interaction and collaboration than does the OU

UK, and that this is one of the factors explaining why comparatively few women enroll in the German system. (p. 45)

A joint research study (Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990) undertaken at the Fern Universitat, West Germany, and Open University, UK, suggested women (40%) indicated a greater desire than men (28%) to interact with other distance education students. Also, when asked about feeling isolated during distance education studies, a quarter of both men and women acknowledged feeling isolated, but “whereas this was a problem for only 24% of the men who felt isolated, it was a problem for 40% of the women” (p. 10).

A scaffolding of support and an ethic of care is imperative for administrators, designers, and instructors of online education in order to ensure a safe, caring environment that will sufficiently support women learners. An ethic of care rests on the awareness that in the unequal relationship of teacher and student, the one being cared for, the student, is defined by vulnerability and the need for help or instruction from the one who is in the position to give or withhold care, the teacher (Schweickart, 1990). An ethic of care also rests on an understanding that “the listener will respect the fragility of the other’s speech . . . attentive not only to what is written but also to what is yet to be written” (Schweickart, 1990, pp. 89–90). In online education, an ethic of care should be foundational, and it may be the difference between retention and attrition, success or failure, growth or stagnation. Furst-Bowe and Dittman (2001) noted in their study of adult women in distance learning programs:

The instructor was the key to a positive learning experience. . . . However, nearly one-third, 30%, of the participants felt they did not have sufficient interaction with the instructors or receive adequate feedback from the instructors in their distance education courses. (p. 408)

This level of understanding of students in the online environment may require unique training for administrators and faculty of distance education; perhaps administrators and faculty can become online students during training in order to develop empathy for the online student, and perhaps during this training they can engage in critical reflection of their philosophy of teaching. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) elaborated on the importance of this philosophy:

Scholars such as Gilligan (1982), Noddings (1984, 1992), and Beck (1994) have promoted the importance of the ethic of care as a critical component, and perhaps the most important one, of educational practice. (p. 374)

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) continued the discussion regarding this important philosophy:

Beck (1994) sees fostering “communal relationships with other people [as] inextricably related to the welfare of others so that one caring for others in fact cares for herself or himself” (p. 20). In other words, a caring relationship fosters a real commitment to another, which leads to mutual benefits for both. Developing and maintaining caring relationships through an ethic of care as an instructor or program planner is a very time-consuming commitment, especially when working with others who are reluctant to adopt a culture that embraces care

as foundational to practice. The ethic of care is seen in adult learning programs in the mutual respect between learners and instructors, and in how we empower all in our work environments, learners and staff alike, to be all that they can be. (p. 375)

In his book, *On Becoming a Person*, Carl Rogers (1961) suggested that significant learning is more likely to occur when both instructor and student engage cooperatively to address a recognized problem, whether this be a problem widely known in society or a problem relevant to the student's experience. Rogers went on to say that the mutual problem-solving would be most likely to result in significant learning if the following characteristics were contributed by the teacher:

1. Students are either presented with, or they contribute, what is perceived to be “a serious and meaningful problem” (p. 285) to solve.
2. The teacher is a congruent, or real, person in the relationship, “able to *be* the person he [*sic*] *is*” (p. 285).
3. The teacher exudes an “unconditional positive regard” (p. 285) for the students, which “may take place if the teacher can accept the student as he [*sic*] is, and can understand the feelings he [*sic*] possesses” (p. 287).
4. The teacher is willing to share knowledge through the following activities:
 - a. Let students know of special experience and knowledge he or she has in the field.
 - b. Let students know they may access this knowledge.
 - c. Provide his or her perspective about the learning to students.

- d. Be willing to find and provide resources needed by students; become known as a resource-finder.
- e. Promote a relationship that encourages open communication without imposing a particular viewpoint on students.

(pp. 288–289)

- 5. The teacher relies on the premise that students, through the learning, are seeking to self-actualize, that is they “wish to learn, want to grow, seek to find out, hope to master, desire to create” (p. 289) and sees her or his function “as that of developing such a personal relationship with his students, and such a climate in his classroom, that these natural tendencies could come to their fruition” (pp. 289–290).

Despite the barriers women face as they seek education, a growing number of women are entering distance education and completing their degrees fully online. Rather than attempting to capture numerical data on the numbers of women entering online degrees, this study was designed to fill a void in existing knowledge of women’s reflections on why they sought the online mode of instruction and how earning the online degree changed their lives, both personally and professionally. The nature of the research question fostered the utilization of a qualitative form of inquiry. Particularly, the heuristic research methodology utilized in this study allowed emphasis to be placed on the in-depth experiences of not only the eighteen participants, but also the researcher, during the pursuit of an online degree.

Chapter II of this dissertation provides a survey of the literature related to women in online educational settings. The literature about women in online learning gives an overview of barriers women have traditionally faced when trying to gain access to higher education, the growing migration of women toward online education, the motivation of women to succeed through educational attainment, the potential for personal development and transformation through learning, and the expectation that may be associated with learning. As previously stated, the findings of this study and the personal experiences of these women are not generalized to a vast audience; rather, the data are offered for individual interpretation. The literature indicates that there have been numerous studies to examine factors that prevent women from succeeding in online education or scrutinize their particular learning styles, but there is noticeably less information taken from direct accounts of women who did succeed in earning an online degree and who were willing to share details of the experience and resulting changes in their lives. The personal and detailed information gained through this research study adds to the existing body of knowledge that is largely devoted to the numbers of women entering online education, the numbers of women successfully earning degrees, and learner characteristics of women in the online environment. Questions remained about the level of change that occurred in the lives of women a year or more after earning an online master's degree.

Chapter III explains the heuristic methodology that guided this research and the role of the researcher in the inquiry. This methodology allowed both the researcher and participants to provide detailed accounts of how their lives had changed as a result of

earning the degree. The change described by many of the participants was personal in nature – the process of earning the degree affected each of their own lives and the lives of their family members; therefore, it was imperative that the researcher be a woman who could independently satisfy all criteria of the study herself. By meeting all criteria and having previously earned an online degree as a means to overcoming multiple barriers to higher education, the researcher was able to express empathy for participants; share, when questioned by participants, portions of her own experience; and affirm the importance of information that was shared by participants. The methodology provided a unique bridge between researcher and participant that fostered a heightened sense of trust in the researcher and validation of the study in the minds of the participants. Each interview was an open-ended invitation for the participant to share with the researcher her motivation for earning an online degree; the extent and types of personal and professional development she experienced; actual transformation that may have occurred, as perceived by the participant; her expectations when entering the degree program as compared to the outcomes after completing the degree; how she overcame challenges and barriers; opportunities that emerged as a result of earning the degree; and the importance each participant associated with the opportunity for all women to earn an online degree.

Chapter IV provides explication of the themes which emerged from this study. Narratives of the women in this study indicated the following themes: barriers to higher education, benefits of online education, professional development, personal development, the impact on others, double standard for women, higher education's need

for change, concern for other women, and qualities evident in excellent online instructors. During the data analysis phase, it became obvious that all of the women in the study had experienced, to some degree, both personal and professional development as a result of earning the degree. However, a small number of the women explained that their lives were significantly changed by earning the online degree. Because of this significant difference in the degree of change, a separate chapter, Chapter V, was created and devoted to these women.

Chapter V details experiences by women in this study who experienced a dramatic and transformational change as a result of earning the online master's degree. This is a holistic view of their experiences and an explanation of the transformational outcomes within the lives of these women. Four characteristics were common to the women who experienced the greatest degree of change and transformation, and these characteristics are detailed in Chapter V.

Chapter VI summarizes the findings and recommendations of the researcher based upon the study. The contributions to Human Resource Development are also outlined in this section.

Operational Definitions

Career outcomes. The “knowledge, expertise, learning, renewal and growth” (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 107) that influence and drive the “pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person's life” (Noe, 2002, p. 452).

Change. “A cognitive process which is facilitated by the obtaining of new information and concepts” (Schein, 1980, p. 245). Lewin (1951) described change as the result of a “constellation of psychological forces” (p. 256) pushing a person toward a positive outcome coupled with restraining forces that represent barriers.

Distance education. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (2006a) defines a distance education course as follows:

One in which the majority of the instruction occurs when the students and instructor are not in the same physical setting. A course is considered to be offered by distance education if students receive more than one-half of the instruction at a different location than the instructor. A distance education course can be delivered synchronously or asynchronously to any single or multiple location(s) through electronic, correspondence, or other means. The course may be formula-funded or offered through extension, and it may be delivered to on-campus students and those who do not take courses on the main campus. (Chapter 4.103, Subchapter E, 9)

Expectancy. Beliefs that “represent the individual’s judgment about whether applying (or increasing) effort to a task will result in its successful accomplishment....People with high expectancy believe that increased effort will lead to better performance, but people with low expectancy do not believe that their efforts, no matter how great, will affect their performance” (Desimone, Werner, & Harris, 2002, p. 50).

Heuristic Inquiry. “A search for the discovery of meaning and essence in significant human experience. It requires a subjective process of reflecting, exploring, sifting, and elucidating the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Its ultimate purpose is to cast light on a focused problem, question, or theme” (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 40).

Heuristic Self-search Inquiry. “Heuristic self-search inquiry is a psychological process wherein the researcher surrenders to the feeling in an experience and does not know what will be learned at the time the inquiry is begun” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 83).

Member Check: Verification of data and interpretations by those persons involved in the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Online degree. A degree in which there has been a “provision of learning resources to remote learners and involving both *distance teaching* (the instructor’s role in the process) and *distance learning* (the student’s role)” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 5). The degree is obtained by completing all required courses of the educational program using the Internet as a collaborative learning environment where there are several types of interaction:

learner-to-interface (access to and competency with the specific technology employed), learner-to-content (appropriateness of the course material and delivery vehicle considering the objectives and learners), learner-to-instructor (types of communication and feedback, access and support, etc.), and learner-to-learner (types of communication and feedback, support systems, and procedures for dialogue, etc.). (Ehrlich, 2002, p. 49)

Online education. Distance education that is delivered via the Internet (Kramarae, 2001) and where the teacher and learner are separated during the instructional process and rely on “educational media to unite teacher and learner and carry course content” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 5). Historically, distance education has been delivered via mail (correspondence), interactive video (ITV), satellite, cable, videotape, and other electronic means. For this study, online education refers to the delivery of instruction via the Internet in a way that allows for both asynchronous and synchronous discussion among participants so that “learning is an active process in which both the instructor and the learners must participate” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 6).

Motivations. “The needs that learners feel when starting a learning activity. They may relate to unmet needs or unwanted conditions in life and to the pursuit of positive growth toward desired goals” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, pp. 397-398).

Personal Transformation. Personal transformation involves a change in the perceptions and beliefs held by an individual as a result of the assimilation and accommodation of new concepts and the ability to reflect critically on one’s thoughts and assumptions (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Professional Transformation. Professional transformation is the increased potential for career development as a result of the “acquisition of new knowledge, skills, and attitudes on a continual basis” (Berge, 2001, p. 6).

Self-actualization. “The tendency for the organism to flow into all the differentiated channels of potential development, insofar as these are experienced as enhancing” (Rogers, 1961, p. 285).

Symbolic Growth Experience. “Significant moments in life when we create personal meaning by symbolizing our immediate experience in the interest of heightened awareness and personal growth” (Frick, 1987, p. 406).

Transformational Learning. Mezirow (2000) defined transformational learning as follows:

The process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (p. 8)

The following chapters outline the study of eighteen women who overcame significant barriers to earn an online degree and, as a result, experienced varying degrees of change.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I review the literature related to women in online education. A search of the literature occurred in three stages. First, articles were reviewed and selected using Academic Search Premier/EBSCO and ERIC/EBSCO electronic databases with search descriptors relevant to barriers women face when seeking an online degree, evidence of migration by women toward the online degree mode of delivery, and an overview of theories of motivation, self-determination, transformative change, and expectation which may affect the success or failure of women seeking an online degree.

Second, a broader review of the literature involved: (1) a search for articles in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals as well as recent dissertations using ERIC-EBSCO and UMI databases (2) electronically filing and summarizing selected articles, and (3) synthesizing relevant information from the articles related to a) general participation in online education; b) women in online education; c) transformative learning; d) transformational learning experiences for women; and e) career outcomes for women earning degrees.

Key terms included:

online education	female? and distance education
online learning	female? and distance learning
distance education	transformational learning
distance learning	transformative learning

online education participation	transformative education
wom?n and online education	wom?n and transformational learning
wom?n and distance education	wom?n and transformative learning
wom?n and online learning	career and females and earning a degree
wom?n and distance learning	outcomes and females and earning a degree
female? and online education	earning a degree and career
female? and online learning	wom?n and attainment and achievement

The search period was from year 2003 to 2007 with the exception of a dissertation from the year 2002 included in one of the tables due to its relevance to the topic. Ample literature was found on the topics of general participation in online learning, transformational or transformative learning, and career outcomes for women earning a degree; however, significantly fewer articles were available on the topics of women in distance learning and transformational learning experiences for women. Articles were downloaded on a computer, stored in separate electronic folders, and categorized electronically in a Microsoft Word document.

Third, an additional search of journals noted by the researcher as having been repeatedly cited in previous searches was conducted as follows:

- The ERIC-EBSCO database provided access to the top peer-reviewed education journals in the related fields. The UMI database of dissertations was also researched for dissertations pertaining to women in online learning. Some journals were accessed and searched using the JSTOR archive or the particular

search tool for that journal. The journals selected were *The American Journal of Distance Education*, *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *The Journal of Distance Education*, *Innovations in Education and Technology International*, *Innovative Higher Education*, *College Teaching*, *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Gender and Education*, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *Journal of Transformative Education*, *Human Resource Development International*, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Sociology of Education*, *Journal of Career Development*, *Work and Occupations*, and *The Career Development Quarterly*.

- Articles were chosen based on key terms and their overall relevance to the topic being searched.
- After being selected, articles were downloaded on a computer, stored in separate electronic folders, and categorized electronically in a Microsoft Word document.

Tables 1-5 of this document contain information pertaining to the 54 articles retrieved from peer-reviewed journals and three dissertations retrieved from the UMI dissertations abstracts database during the two final phases of literature review – general database searches using key words and specific journal searches using key words. There are tables for each topic – general participation in online education (Table 1); women in online education (Table 2); transformational learning (Table 3); transformational learning experiences for women (Table 4); and career outcomes for women earning degrees (Table 5). The tables contain the citation, abstract (when available), and a summary of

key findings. Each table is followed by a summative description of key articles in that particular table.

In addition to the numerous articles which resulted from months of continuous searching on the key topics previously listed, selected books utilized for the study included *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress* by Mezirow (2000), *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky et al. (1986), *Learning in Adulthood* by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), *Women and Distance Education: Challenges and Opportunities* by von Prummer (2000), *Employee Training and Development* by Noe (2002), *On Becoming a Person* by Rogers (1961), *Researching Learners Through Telecommunications* by Duning, Van Kekerix, and Zaborowski (1993), *OU Women: Undoing Educational Obstacles* by Lunneborg (1994), *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* by Palloff and Pratt (1999), *Personal Knowledge* by Polanyi (1962), *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications* by Moustakas (1990), and *Dancing on the Glass Ceiling* by Olcott and Hardy (2006).

This is not a complete review of all articles and books written about online education or women in online education. That goal would have been nearly impossible given the reach of articles and books in publications all over the world and across every discipline, and the preliminary state of much of the research. It represents, however, a systematic search for relevant articles in likely sources based on the title, the abstract, or a citation from another study.

TABLE 1
General Participation in Online Education

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Benson, A. D. (2003). Dimensions of quality in online degree programs. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 17(3), 145-159.	Using a qualitative case study design, this article explores the different meanings of quality that stakeholders brought to the process of planning online degree programs for a university system distance learning initiative and examines the impact of those different meanings on the resulting planning process and the resulting online degree programs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There may be significant variances in the definitions of quality among stakeholders involved in distance education programs. • Differences may result in unexpected influences on the programs. • Surfacing differences and agreeing on quality in the planning process is a good first step in program development.
Smith, P. J., Murphy, K. L., & Mahoney, S. E. (2003). Towards identifying factors underlying readiness for online learning: An exploratory. <i>Distance Education</i> , 24(1), 57-67.	To test the potential value of McVay's (2000) Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire for research and practice, the instrument was administered to 107 undergraduate university students drawn from a range of courses in the United States and Australia. The questionnaire was subjected to a reliability analysis and a factor analysis. The instrument fared well in the reliability analysis, and yielded a two-factor structure that was readily interpretable in a framework of existing theory and research. Factors identified were "Comfort with e-learning" and "Self management of learning." It is suggested that the instrument is useful for both research and practice, but would be enhanced through further work on five of the thirteen items. Additionally, further work is required to establish predictive validity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a study of 107 undergraduate university students, researchers found McVay's Readiness for Online Learning Questionnaire to be a useful tool in its present form but would be enhanced with further work on five of the thirteen items.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Wallace, R. M. (2003). Online learning in higher education: A review of research on interactions among teachers and students. <i>Education, Communication & Information</i> , 3(2), 241-280.	Online learning has become a widespread method for providing education at the graduate and undergraduate level. Although it is an extension of distance learning, the medium requires new modes of presentation and interaction. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the existing literature in communications, distance education, educational technology, and other education-related fields, to articulate what is currently known about online teaching and learning, how the field has been conceptualized in the various research communities, and what might be useful areas for future research. The review indicates that, although there has been extensive work to conceptualize and understand the social interactions and constructs entailed by online education, there has been little work that connects these concepts to subject-specific interactions and learning. That is, the literature provides insights into social aspects of online teaching and learning such as the development of community, the social roles of teachers and students, and the creation of online presence. The review recommends future research into how these social, personal, and interpersonal aspects relate to subject matter learning, the impact of differences in subject matter, and how students learn online.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The author provided an overview of existing literature in communications, distance education, educational technology, and other education-related fields to articulate what is currently known about online teaching and learning, how the field has been conceptualized in the various research communities, and what might be useful areas for future research. • The author recommended future research into how the social, personal, and interpersonal aspects of online teaching and learning relate to subject matter learning, the impact of differences in subject matter, and how students learn online.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Dabbagh, N. (2004). Distance learning: Emerging pedagogical issues and learning designs. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 5(1), 37-49.	Distance learning has significantly changed over the years from a social, pedagogical, and technological perspective. The compatible bonding of telecommunications technologies and social constructivist learning principles premised a pedagogical ecology that has challenged traditional teaching practices, faculty and student roles, institutional roles, and academic infrastructures, prompting a reconceptualization of distance learning and a rethinking of the broader practice of education and training. Pedagogical ecology emphasizes the non-neutrality of the learning space and consideration of the expectations and potentials that each learning medium brings forth to the teaching and learning process. This paper discusses the evolution of the pedagogical ecology of distance learning and presents a model for the design of online learning environments that emphasizes a transformative interaction between learning technologies, pedagogical models, and instructional strategies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distance learning has challenged traditional teaching practices, student roles, institutional roles, and academic infrastructures, prompting a reconceptualization of distance learning. • Distance education challenges the traditional view of instruction “in which the teacher is the expert, main deliverer of knowledge, and the sole assessor of student learning” (p. 38).
DeTure, M. (2004). Cognitive style and self-efficacy: Predicting student success in online distance education. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 18(1), 21-38.	This study was designed to identify those learner attributes that may be used to predict student success (in terms of grade point average) in a Web-based distance education setting. Students enrolled in six Web-based, general education distance education courses at a community college were asked to complete the Group Embedded Figures Test for field dependence/independence and the Online Technologies Self-Efficacy Scale to determine their entry-level confidence with necessary computer skills for online learning. Although the students who were more field independent tended to have higher online technologies self-efficacy, they did not receive higher grades than those students who were field dependent and had lower online technologies self-efficacy. Cognitive style scores and online technologies self-efficacy scores were poor predictors of student success in online distance education courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers studied 73 students (79.5% female and 20.5% male) enrolled in six online courses. • Researchers used the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT), which determines participants’ relative field dependence/independence by measuring their relative ability to disembed a figure from a more complex visual field. • Researchers found that the more field-independent students tend to have higher online technologies self-efficacy.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Downing, K., & Chim, T. M. (2004). Reflectors as online extraverts? <i>Educational Studies</i> , 30(3), 265-276.	Increasingly, online learning is perceived as an effective method of instruction. Much recent educational research has focused on examining the purposes and situations for which online education is best suited. In this paper, students enrolled in two online courses are compared with their peers enrolled in equivalent classroom-based courses to investigate aspects of the relationship between learning style and mode of delivery. Student satisfaction measures are taken from participants in both modes of delivery and compared with student learning style. Feedback from the 'Reflector' learning style demonstrates higher satisfaction levels with the online mode of delivery compared with their matched counterparts following equivalent classroom-based courses. Therefore, whilst 'Reflectors' might be regarded as Introverts in the traditional classroom setting, the additional time for reflection offered by online delivery makes this group more likely to contribute to online discussion, report higher satisfaction levels and generally behave more like online Extraverts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of a study of 80 students in two traditional undergraduate classes and 80 students in two online undergraduate classes indicated students identified as "Reflectors", those with a learning style valuing additional time for reflection, may seem introverted in the traditional classroom but, given the opportunity to engage in discussion with teacher and fellow students via the online bulletin board, "behave in a more extraverted and active way" (p. 273) in the online environment. • Reflectors reported feelings of being unable to contribute fully, or having been 'beaten to the comment' in the traditional classroom. • On the contrary, learners who were considered Activists and Pragmatists were extraverted in any classroom setting.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Reisetter, M., & Boris, G. (2004). What works: Student perceptions of effective elements in online learning. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 5(4), 277-291.	Online education holds great potential for rural states like South Dakota, which has been recognized for advances in distance education. To maximize the potential of online learning, design elements that students believe are needed for successful online learning experiences must be identified. In this study, we present the qualitative and quantitative results of a survey administered to students in seven School of Education graduate courses at the University of South Dakota. Course coherence, clear goals, teacher voice, and extensive teacher feedback were the most important elements for learner success. Student-to-student communications ranked lower than expected in students' analysis of their experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of a study of 59 students enrolled in online graduate courses indicated learners were typical – most were women. • They chose online for accessibility, convenience, and flexibility. • Students were technologically savvy. • Students were satisfied with their experiences in online learning. • Students felt strongly they should be self-directed responsible for success through time management and personal engagement. • Students felt two factors in course design were critical: coherent design (organization, clear expectations, ease of navigation, clear procedures) and the teachers' voice (evidence of the teacher's personality in the content). • Students less impressed w/bells and whistles than with clarity, usability, and coherence. • Critical aspects of online course design identified included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teacher's voice in the course. ○ Personality in content. ○ Teacher-created unit introductions in conversational style, personal examples, and responses to frequently asked questions in personal language. ○ Extensive and personalized feedback. ○ A link to instructor's homepage and vita. ○ Surprisingly low value was placed on peer interactions.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Adams, J., & DeFleur, M. H. (2005). The acceptability of a doctoral degree earned online as a credential for obtaining a faculty position. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 19(2), 71-85.	A national survey was used to assess the acceptability of a job applicant's qualifications that included online coursework. The questionnaire, sent to hiring committee chairpersons, described three hypothetical applicants who earned degrees through a "traditional" institution, a "virtual" institution, and "mixed" coursework. The respondents were asked to select one applicant for the position and provide written explanations. The applicant with a traditional degree was preferred in two different hiring scenarios. The respondents' comments revealed five categories of importance: experiences, institutional quality, face-to-face interaction, socialization, and mentoring.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers conducting a national survey of 109 academic search committee chairs found that when asked to choose between recommending an applicant with a traditional degree and one with an online degree, 98% chose the candidate with the traditional degree. Only one of the respondents selected the online degree. (p. 78) • "The traditional degree is valued overwhelmingly compared to one earned partially online (94% compared to 16%)" (p. 78). • "Overall, from the quantitative results, it seems clear that those applying for a faculty position in the institutions included in this analysis would have virtually no prospect of gaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online. Moreover, their chances would be slim if a sizable part of their course work had been completed online – even though they had a doctorate awarded by a traditional institution" (p. 79).

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Egan, T. M., & Akdere, M. (2005). Clarifying distance education roles and competencies: Exploring similarities and differences between professional and student-practitioner perspectives. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 19(2), 87-103.	The authors utilized a Delphi technique to explore roles and competencies as identified and ranked by 106 upper level graduate student-practitioners from eleven academic programs specializing in distance education. Responses were compared to two previous studies utilizing distance education expert/scholar respondents. Although the roles identified were similar to previous studies, the highest rated competencies in the current study emphasized technical expertise to a greater degree than did the previous practitioner/scholar studies. Results included consensus on fourteen distance education roles and twenty-one core competencies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers used a Delphi study to survey 106 individuals from “twelve programs in the central United States featuring a specialization, minor, or degree program in distance education” (p. 93). • Researchers “compared the top ten competencies identified in each study and found the Thach (1994) and Williams (2003) studies emphasized communication competencies as most important, whereas respondents in the current study focused on technology” (p. 97). • “The data collected for this study, when compared with the previous studies by Thach (1994) and Williams (2003), move the distance education field closer to clearly delineating roles and competencies important to distance education” (p. 100).
Vonderwell, S., & Zachariah, S. (2005). Factors that influence participation in online learning. <i>Journal of Research on Technology in Education</i> , 38(2), 213-230.	This study explored what factors influenced learner participation in two sections of a graduate online course at a Midwestern university. Findings indicated that online learner participation and patterns of participation are influenced by the following factors: technology and interface characteristics, content area experience, student roles and instructional tasks, and information overload. Effective online learning requires interdependence for a shared understanding of learning goals in a learning community. Monitoring student participation and patterns of participation closely can help instructors identify student needs and scaffold learning accordingly. (Keywords: online learning, learner participation, asynchronous discussion, interface design, information overload)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers used a case study approach to investigate participation in two sections of an online graduate course. • Researchers found that “online learner participation and patterns of participation were influenced by the following factors: technology and interface characteristics, content-area experience, student roles and instructional tasks, and information overload” (p. 222). • “Careful construction of online roles and tasks, and insight into how groups and learning communities develop, becomes crucial” (p. 225). • Effective online learning requires interdependence for a shared understanding of learning goals in a learning community.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Darabi, A. A., Sikorski, E. G., & Harvey, R. B. (2006). Validated competencies for distance teaching. <i>Distance Education, 27</i> (1), 105-122.	The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (IBSTPI) provides a methodology for drafting and validating teaching competencies. This study applied the IBSTPI methodology to identify and validate distance education (DE) instructor competencies. The research team's review of DE literature in the past ten years resulted in a list of 20 competencies. The list was reviewed by eighteen distance learning professionals as subject matter experts (SMEs). The SMEs' feedback and comments along with the performance statements developed for the competencies were analyzed which resulted in 54 task statements describing the instructional activities of a DE instructor. These tasks were then rated by 148 instructors in terms of importance, frequency of performance, and the perception of relative time spent on each task. The task analysis resulted in a list of seventeen most frequently performed tasks that we linked back to the corresponding original competencies. Analysis of these data pointed out the significant characteristics of teaching from a distance including interaction with learners and technological and logistical requirements. This article presents the methodology and findings of this study and discusses their implications for recruitment, selection, and training of DE instructors.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competencies for distance teaching were reviewed by a team of 148 distance instructors. • The analysis resulted in a list of seventeen tasks commonly performed by distance instructors, and the tasks were rated in terms of importance, frequency of performance, and the time spent on each task. • Areas related to communication, discussion, interaction, and feedback ranked highest among the distance education instructor competencies according to members of the review team.
Ellis, R. A., & Moore, R. R. (2006). Learning through benchmarking: Developing a relational, prospective approach to benchmarking ICT in learning and teaching. <i>Higher Education, 51</i> , 351-371.	This study discusses benchmarking the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning between two universities with different missions: one an Australian campus-based metropolitan university and the other a British distance-education provider. It argues that the differences notwithstanding, it is possible to develop a useful and rigorous benchmarking relationship between such institutions that draws on previous benchmarking research and improves the approach by benchmarking key processes, not just outcomes. By defining a process used to embed ICT in subjects and using this as a focus of the benchmarking, a relational and prospective approach to quality assurance for ICT can be clarified, one which promotes coherence amongst the benchmarks that can be used for the purposes of improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benchmarking key processes in distance education is an essential part of quality assurance and program improvement. • "The quality model is an outcomes-based model; one that promotes and emphasizes the student in the evaluation of successful learning. In this sense, the starting point in the evaluation of the quality of the technology is whether or not students evaluate it as appropriate from their perspective" (p. 363).

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Lee, J., Carter-Wells, J., Glaeser, B., Ivers, K., & Street, C. (2006). Facilitating the development of a learning community in an online graduate program. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(1), 13-33.	This case study analyzed how an online learning community developed among a cohort of eighteen students in an instructional design and technology master's degree program taught at a distance. Students' reflections about the effectiveness of the program revealed that a community-centered approach to learning, a constructivist learning environment, and authentic assessment practices most supported community development. Positive interactions among community members facilitated by faculty contributed to community development, but did not correlate with academic achievement. Students ranked computer-mediated communication, which provided technological support for learning, and participation in critical discourses across multiple forums, as conditions highly conducive to community development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers conducted a 3-year longitudinal case study of 22 students enrolled in ten online courses. • "Effective and frequent communication on the part of the instructor and positive peer-to-peer communication appeared to be more important than the technology" (p. 27). • "Students cited community-centered approaches to learning as most essential for building community, followed closely by the establishment of a constructivist learning environment" (p. 28).
Martinez, R., Liu, S., Watson, W., & Bichelmeyer, B. (2006). Evaluation of a web-based master's degree program: Lessons learned from an online instructional design and technology program. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(3), 267-283.	Program evaluation is an important component of successful distance education programs. In this article, a distance master's Instructional Design and Technology Program is evaluated for overall quality. Interviews and a Web-based survey were the major instruments employed. Data was collected from three groups associated with the program: administrators, faculty, and students. The results discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the program, the benefits and drawbacks of teaching online, and several factors related to technology, program management, and course management, including instructional design. The findings emphasize the importance of technology and faculty in the program's success, and make recommendations for improvement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students chose the online degree program based on the reputation of the department and the faculty. • Convenience and flexibility were factors in choosing DE. • Students showed a high level of technological readiness.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Richardson, J. C., & Newby, T. (2006). The role of students' cognitive engagement in online learning. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 20(1), 23-37.	This study investigated the degree to which students cognitively engage with their online courses. <i>Cognitive engagement</i> was defined as the integration and utilization of students' motivations and strategies in the course of their learning. Given this, the study utilized J. B. Biggs's (1987a) Study Process Questionnaire to measure motivations and strategies in general, rather than for a specific task. Statistically significant findings were observed for program focus, gender, age, and prior online experience in accordance with students' learning strategies and motivations. Specifically, the findings indicate that as students gain experience with online learning, they come to take more responsibility for their own learning. The findings have implications for how instructors facilitate online courses as well as how designers organize online courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of a study of 121 post baccalaureate students in online courses at two universities indicated as students gain experience with online courses, they tend to show an increase in organizing their time and following up on resources. This implies that students learn to take more responsibility for their own learning in online learning environments, perhaps becoming more self-directed with each online course experience. • Gender was not a significant factor in learning strategies and motivations.
Simonson, M. (2006a). Growing by degrees. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(2), vi-viii.	None provided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online education was deemed critical to the long-term plans of 56% of higher education, up from 49% in 2003. • Enrollments in online courses up to 2.4 million from two million in 2003. • Higher education leaders still feel online instruction takes more effort, is harder for students, and is more difficult to evaluate quality of online courses. • The keys to effective online instruction are proper course design and appropriate instructional strategies.
Simonson, M. (2006b). Teaching courses online: A challenge for the field. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(4), vii-viii.	None provided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A review of the literature on distance education by Tallent-Runnels indicated there needs to be more theory-based research in distance education.

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Tallent-Runnels, M. K., Thomas, J. A., Lan, W. Y., Cooper, S., Ahern, T. C., Shaw, S. M., & Liu, X. (2006). Teaching courses online: A review of the research. <i>Review of Educational Research</i> , 76(1), 93-135.	This literature review summarizes research on online teaching and learning. It is organized into four topics: course environment, learners' outcomes, learners' characteristics, and institutional and administrative factors. The authors found little consistency of terminology, discovered some conclusive guidelines, and identified developing lines of inquiry. The conclusions overall suggest that most of the studies reviewed were descriptive and exploratory, that most online students are nontraditional and Anglo American, and that few universities have written policies, guidelines, or technical support for faculty members or students. Asynchronous communication seemed to facilitate in-depth communication (but not more than in traditional classes), students liked to move at their own pace, learning outcomes appeared to be the same as in traditional courses, and students with prior training in computers were more satisfied with online courses. Continued research is needed to inform learner outcomes, learner characteristics, course environment, and institutional factors related to delivery system variables in order to test learning theories and teaching models inherent in course design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most online students are nontraditional. • “Few universities have written policies, guidelines, or technical support for faculty member or students” (p. 93). • Asynchronous communication facilitated in-depth communication. • Learning outcomes are the same as in traditional courses. • Students with prior computer training were more satisfied. • “Continued research is needed to inform learner outcomes, characteristics, course environment, and institutional factors related to delivery system variables in order to test learning theories and teaching models inherent in course design” (p. 93).
Wickersham, L. E., & Dooley, K. E. (2006). A content analysis of critical thinking skills as an indicator of quality of online discussion in virtual learning communities. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(2), 2006, 185-193.	Online discussion is a common tool to create learner-learner interaction. Whole class discussions can result in potentially hundreds of postings with students spending more time creating the illusion of participation as opposed to critical reflection and deeper learning. The purpose of this study was to determine quality of online discussion based on critical thinking constructs when learners were placed in smaller learning communities and not exposed to whole class discussion. The researchers sought to determine if discrepancies among the groups would exist and if students would receive the full benefit of learner-learner interaction by placing them in smaller groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students engage in quality critical thinking in small online group discussions. • Learners with more life experiences impact the learner-learner interaction within the virtual learning community.

TABLE 1 continued

Citation	Abstract copied from article and key terms: <i>online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	Summary of key points
Young, S. (2006). Student views of effective online teaching in higher education. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i> , 20(2), 65-77.	This study investigated student views of online instruction in higher education courses. Data were collected from 199 online students using a Web-based instrument. The instrument consisted of items that were expected to be associated with effective online teaching. One overall effective teaching item was regressed onto twenty-five items in order to identify a core group of items that related most strongly with effective teaching. Seven items emerged as the core group: adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning. These seven items explained 86.2% of the variability in effective teaching and provided one definition of effective online teaching. In open-ended comments, the students wrote that effective teachers are visibly and actively involved in the learning, work hard to establish trusting relationships, and provide a structured, yet flexible classroom environment.	Responses of 199 undergraduates and graduate students enrolled in online classes indicated the characteristics of effective online teaching included the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. adapting to student needs, 2. providing meaningful examples, 3. motivating students to do their best, 4. facilitating the course effectively, 5. delivering a valuable course, 6. communicating effectively, and 7. showing concern for student learning <p>(p. 73).</p>
Dooley, K., & Wickersham, L. E. (2007). Distraction, domination, and disconnection in whole-class online discussions. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 8(1), 1-8.	Online courses continue to gain popularity at colleges and universities, with a primary tool for demonstrating critical thinking and interaction being the discussion forum. Instructors and students of online courses are faced with the dilemma of sifting through potentially hundreds of postings when all students are placed within a forum. The purpose of this study was to determine the level of critical thinking and interaction present during whole class discussion compared with smaller virtual learning communities based on the Newman, Webb, and Cochrane (1996) indicators. A content analysis of discussion threads revealed that critical thinking was present, although unique communication patterns did emerge.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers studied discussion transcripts of 28 students in an online graduate course to compare the level of critical thinking in small groups to that in whole group discussion among all 28 students. • Researchers found that whole group discussions “were distracted or off-topic more often, dominated by only a few individuals, and disconnected with little ‘intense’ interaction” (p. 6). • “Within the smaller virtual learning communities, if students get off-topic or distracted, it is easier for the instructor to pinpoint when and where the distraction occurred and redirect the flow of conversation” (p. 7).

TABLE 1 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: online and education; online and learning; distance and education; distance and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
El Mansour, B., & Mupinga, D. M. (2007). Students' positive and negative experiences in hybrid and online classes. <i>College Student Journal, 41</i> (1), 242-248.	As higher education institutions struggle to meet the growing demand for education from non-traditional students, many are turning to hybrid and online courses. These courses, free up classroom space, allow faculty to reach a wider audience using technology; and are therefore cost effective. But, what learning experiences do these courses provide students? Understanding the students' experiences in these courses has implications on the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. This study describes the characteristics of hybrid and online courses, the students' positive and negative experiences in hybrid and online courses, and what can be done to improve hybrid and online courses. Twelve students enrolled in a hybrid course and 41 students in an online course were interviewed for this qualitative study. Additional data was obtained from the class' online discussion forums. Flexibility in the class schedule and the instructor's availability were positive experiences for the hybrid course. Convenience, instructor availability, and online interactions were cited as positives for the online course while the negatives were technology hiccups and a sense of feeling lost in Cyberspace. Training faculty and familiarizing students with online course environments are recommended to improve online and hybrid courses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forty-one undergraduate students in a four-year Midwestern college enrolled in a hybrid (n=12) or fully online (n=34) courses were surveyed. • Researchers found that students in fully online courses listed convenience, class expectations that were the same as a face-to-face class, and instructor availability as positive aspects. • Students listed technology problems as negative experiences. • Students also “felt teachers did not get to know the students personally” in the online classes, and “there was no way of reading body language [from fellow students or the instructor]” (p. 245).

Summary of Table 1

Current literature depicted in Table 1 indicated distance learning programs may differ significantly in quality primarily due to a lack of consistency in defining the very nature of quality by those who are planning and developing online programs (Benson, 2003). Benson (2003) recommended stakeholders come to some agreement on quality at the outset of the planning process in order to mitigate unexpected influences. Wallace (2003) recommended future research into how the social, personal, and interpersonal aspects of online teaching and learning relate to subject matter learning, the impact of differences in subject matter, and how students learn online. Accordingly, Dabbagh

(2004) investigated the significant changes in distance learning from a social, pedagogical and technological perspective. Dabbagh (2004) found the changes of Web-based technologies promoted social constructivist learning principles, articulation, and reflection that are “self-organizing and transformative in nature” (p. 48). Downing and Chim (2004) found that reflective students, those valuing additional time for reflection, “behave in a more extraverted and active way” (p. 273) in the online environment, which “is in stark contrast to feelings of having been...’beaten to the comment’ reported by Reflectors in the traditional mode of delivery” (p. 273).

Reisetter and Boris (2004) utilized both quantitative and qualitative analysis of 59 students in online graduate courses in a rural setting. The results indicated that the students, the majority of whom were women, chose online courses for accessibility, convenience, and flexibility. Two factors stood out as critical to the success of students in this study: 1) coherent course design – organization, clear expectations, ease of navigation, and clear procedures, and 2) the teacher’s voice in the course design – “the more often students had the opportunity to sense teachers’ personalities in the course materials, the more connected they felt to the class” (p. 288). El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) found that students in fully online courses listed convenience, class expectations that were the same as a face-to-face class, and instructor availability as positive aspects, and the students listed technology problems as negative experiences. Students also “‘felt the teachers did not get to know the students personally’ and that ‘there was no way of reading body language [from either fellow students or the instructor]’” (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007, p. 245). Lee, Carter-Wells, Glaeser, Ivers, and Street (2006), in a

longitudinal study of 22 students enrolled in ten online courses, found communication to be critical. “Effective and frequent communication on the part of the instructor and positive peer-to-peer communication appeared to be more important than the technology” (p. 27).

According to Adams and DeFleur (2005), attitudes about hiring faculty who earned an online degree, whether fully online or partially online, are negative. The researchers note their quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that 109 hiring committee chairs overwhelmingly chose applicants with traditional degrees over candidates who had earned a fully online degree (98% as compared to only one chair who selected the candidate with the fully online degree) or a degree earned partially online (94% to 16% when compared to degrees earned partially online). In contrast, Simonson (2006a) pointed out,

In 2005, 56% of institutions indicated that online instruction was critical to their long-term plans, up from 49% in 2003. The only institutions that did not see online instruction as part of their long-term strategies were the smallest, nonprofit colleges. (p. viii)

Although universities and students are engaging in distance learning in increasing numbers, Tallent-Runnels, et al. (2006) found that “few universities have written policies, guidelines, or technical support for faculty members or students” (p. 93). These authors suggested “continued research is needed to inform learner outcomes, characteristics, course environment, and institutional factors related to delivery system

variables in order to test learning theories and teaching models inherent in course design” (p. 93).

Several studies (Darabi, Sikorski, & Harvey, 2006; Egan & Akdere, 2005; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005) noted the ambiguity surrounding the identification and refinement of valued competencies, roles, and instructional tasks in distance education, particularly when comparing findings of studies of different constituencies (graduate student-practitioners from distance learning programs, graduate students taking online courses, or distance education instructors). Ellis and Moore (2006) discussed benchmarking the use of information and communication technologies in distance education in order to arrive at quality as defined by students. “The starting point in the evaluation of the quality of the technology is whether or not students evaluate it as appropriate from their perspective” (p. 363).

Martinez, Liu, Watson, and Bichelmeyer (2006) found that students in their evaluation of a distance master’s program chose the online degree program based on the reputation of the department and the faculty. They also noted that convenience and flexibility contributed to students’ decisions to choose distance education. Richardson and Newby (2006) found that as students gain additional experience with online courses, they “take more responsibility for their own learning in online learning environments, perhaps even becoming more self-directed, which would be the expectation as online instructors alter their role from the traditional ‘sage on the stage’ to the ‘guide on the side’ approach” (p. 32).

Studies (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007; Wickersham & Dooley, 2006) of the quality of discussions between learners in the online environment indicated that the students engaged in more critical thinking in smaller discussion groups as compared to the level of critical thinking in whole group discussions. Whole group discussions “were distracted or off-topic more often, dominated by only a few individuals, and disconnected with little ‘intense’ interaction” (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, Dooley and Wickersham (2007) found that “within the smaller virtual learning communities, if students get off-topic or distracted, it is easier for the instructor to pinpoint when and where the distraction occurred and redirect the flow of conversation” (p. 7).

Responses of 199 undergraduates and graduate students enrolled in online classes indicated the characteristics of effective online teaching included the following: adapting to student needs, providing meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning (Young, 2006, p. 73).

The authors of an extensive literature review of research on online teaching and learning (Tallent-Runnels, et al., 2006) indicated “future qualitative research will continue to define researchable variables” (p. 119) and “generate hypotheses in new areas of research” (p. 95). These authors also called for researchers to “develop appropriate theoretical foundations to inform future research” (p. 119). Table 2 addresses issues specific to women in online learning.

TABLE 2
Women in Online Education

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and online and education; wom?n and
online and learning; wom?n and distance
education; gender and online and learning; gender
and online and education;
females and online and education; females and
online and learning*

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Halio, M. P. (2004). Teaching in our pajamas: Negotiating with adult learners in online distance writing courses. <i>College Teaching</i>, 52(2), 58-62.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women spent more time writing email than male students. • Women wrote more messages about personal issues, sometimes allowing this to sidetrack their work in the course. • Women performed as well or better than male students. • Women wrote more emotional, and possibly inflammatory, emails to other students. • Males didn't discuss private issues, but they did want to restructure the course to meet their own needs or time schedules, or contest each set of assignments. • Male students were more likely to send angry, confrontational emails to the instructor, in this case a female.

TABLE 2 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: wom?n and online and education; wom?n and online and learning; wom?n and distance education; gender and online and learning; gender and online and education; females and online and education; females and online and learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Bostock, S. J., & Lizhi, W. (2005). Gender in student online discussions. <i>Innovations in Education and Teaching International</i> , 42(1), 73-85.	In a large online course, students were divided into eighteen asynchronous online discussion groups with different gender mixes. The number and cognitive content of student messages were analyzed. Females wrote more messages than males with no difference in the cognitive quality of message content. In mixed groups, females wrote fewer messages than in all-female groups but males wrote more messages than in all-male groups. Students' characteristics and views were described by nineteen variables. There were significant gender differences in eleven. In multiple regression, the variables most positively related to the number of messages written per student were: a preference for discussions being online; and a high course grade. These partly explained why females wrote more messages.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a study of 1,015 online discussion messages posted by 363 students in groups manipulated by gender, researchers found that gender significantly affected the number and cognitive value of discussion postings. • All-female groups produced more messages per student than male groups. • In mixed gender groups, the number of messages per female dropped while the messages per male increased. The online presence of females somehow encouraged messages from males while the presence of males deterred writing in females. • Females said they were less confident in using computers in general and had a greater preference for paper over wholly online work, yet females wrote more messages on average than did males because 1) more of them had stated they preferred online discussions to face-to-face discussions and 2) they produced better final reports, presumably because they were more able, or conscientious, or engaged with the course.

TABLE 2 continued

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and online and education; wom?n and
online and learning; wom?n and distance
education; gender and online and learning; gender
and online and education;
females and online and education; females and
online and learning*

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Hoskins, S. L., & van Hooff, J. C. (2005). Motivation and ability: Which students use online learning and what influence does it have on their achievement? <i>British Journal of Educational Technology</i>, 36(2), 177-192.</p>	<p>There has been much recent research examining online learning in universities, but two questions seem to have been largely overlooked in this context: (1) Which students voluntarily utilize web-based learning; and (2) Does this use influence their academic achievement? The current study aimed to determine whether the approaches to studying, ability, age, and gender of 110 undergraduates in the second year of a psychology degree predicted the extent to which they utilized online learning using Web Course Tools (WebCT) in support of a core Biological Psychology unit. Data were obtained from WebCT's student tracking system, Entwistle and Ramsden's 18-item Approaches to Studying Inventory (1983) and academic records. Multiple linear regressions and discriminant function analysis were used to examine whether individual differences predicted WebCT use, while analysis of covariance determined whether web use influenced academic achievement. The number of hits, length of access, and use of the bulletin board was predicted by age, with older students using WebCT more. These factors were also influenced by ability and achievement orientation. The degree of participation in self-assessment was not predicted by student variables, but, of those that repeated an online quiz, improvement was more likely in those with lower achievement orientation. Only bulletin board use influenced achievement, with those posting messages outperforming those not using, or passively using bulletin boards. However, because individual differences will determine the extent to which students utilize this facility, it is suggested that future research should focus on developing online learning environments that incorporate activities with both a beneficial influence on learning and appeal to a wide student population.</p>

TABLE 2 continued

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and online and education; wom?n and
online and learning; wom?n and distance
education; gender and online and learning; gender
and online and education;
females and online and education; females and
online and learning*

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Rovai, A. P., & Baker, J. D. (2005). Gender differences in online learning: Sense of community, perceived learning, and interpersonal interactions. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i>, 6(1), 31-44.</p>	<p>Multivariate statistical analyses were used to determine if there were differences in social community, learning community, and perceived learning between male and female students in twelve online graduate education courses in which female students ($n = 162$) outnumbered males ($n = 31$). Study results provided evidence that females felt more connected to other students in their courses, felt that their online learning experiences were more aligned to their educational values and goals, and perceived they learned more than their male peers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results of a study of 281 online graduate students (83.9% were females and 16.1% were males) indicated female participants reflected a stronger sense of community and greater levels of perceived learning than males. • Females posted more messages to discussion boards and felt more connected to other students, felt their online learning experience was more aligned to their educational values and goals, and perceived they learned more. • “The benefit of online education isn’t merely access but includes educational effectiveness. Women participated in the courses at higher rates than male students and identified their experience as socially richer (as evidenced from the sense of community) and educationally more effective (as evidenced by perceived learning) than men” (p. 40).

TABLE 2 continued

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and online and education; wom?n and
online and learning; wom?n and distance
education; gender and online and learning; gender
and online and education;
females and online and education; females and
online and learning*

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Graddy, D. B. (2006). Gender salience and the use of linguistic qualifiers and intensifiers in online course discussions. <i>The American Journal of Distance Education</i>, 20(4), 211-229.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study analyzed discourse in two graduate online classes in economics. “The sample for this study included 157 moderated discussion postings and 33 postings from task-group interactions” (p. 214). • “Women contributed 93 postings to the discussion; men submitted 64 postings” (p. 216). • “The empirical results of this study showed no differences in the use of qualifiers, intensifiers, conditionals, and personal pronouns among the students in the online conversations. Male crowding out did not appear to be an issue in these online dialogues” (p. 226).

TABLE 2 continued

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and online and education; wom?n and
online and learning; wom?n and distance
education; gender and online and learning; gender
and online and education;
females and online and education; females and
online and learning*

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Leisure, T. M. (2007). Female graduate students' experiences in an online doctoral degree program: A heuristic inquiry. <i>Dissertation Abstracts International</i>, 68(01), 203. (UMI No. 3251343)</p>	<p>Leisure (2007) reported in her dissertation study of nine female doctoral graduate students of psychology:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The graduate school experience is more stressful for women” (p. 1). • Online education helps women balance multiple roles and demands on their lives. • Online learning offers flexibility and support of women learners. • Family support is an important factor in the success of women online learners. • There is concern among women earning an online doctoral degree that their credentials will be questioned and the “degree will not be accepted or viewed as being of the same quality as one earned in a traditional brick and mortar institution” (p. 104). • Participants have related that completion of their doctoral degree programs has increased their level of self-esteem, self-confidence, self-worth” (p. 107). • “Participants related no incidents occurring within the confines of their doctoral program that would suggest gender-related discrimination” (p. 109). • “Participants have related that they have a need for feedback and contact from instructors” (p. 111).

Summary of Table 2

Research devoted to women in online learning was not as available as research pertaining to distance or online learning in general; however, several studies were located and categorized in Table 2. Halio (2004) reported on students in her online course and found that the women spent more time writing email than male students, women wrote more messages about personal issues, they wrote more emotional and possibly inflammatory emails. Male students were more likely to send angry, confrontational emails to the instructor.

Bostock and Lizhi (2005) conducted a broad study of 1,015 online discussion messages posted by 363 students in groups manipulated by gender. Results of the study indicated that the all-female groups produced more messages per student than the male groups. In mixed gender groups, the number of messages per female dropped while the messages per male increased; this indicated that the online presence of females somehow encouraged messages from males while the presence of males deterred writing in females (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005). In contrast, Hoskins and van Hooff (2005) found in their study of 110 undergraduate students in an online course that “a larger proportion of males than females entered into dialogue with their peers and teachers (via the use of a bulletin board)” (p. 188).

Rovai and Baker (2005) conducted a study of 281 online graduate students, of whom 83.9% were females and 16.1% were males. Multivariate statistical analyses were used to determine if there were differences in social community, learning community, and perceived learning between male and female students. According to the researchers,

“study results provided evidence that females felt more connected to other student in their courses, felt that their online learning experiences were more aligned to their educational values and goals, and perceived they learned more than their male peers” (Rovai & Baker, 2005, p. 31). Noting the benefit of online education for women, these authors also added:

The benefit of online education isn't merely access but includes educational effectiveness. Women participated in the courses at higher rates than male students and identified their experiences as socially richer (as evidenced from the sense of community) and educationally more effective (as evidenced by perceived learning) than men” (p. 40).

Graddy (2006) studied students' postings in two graduate online classes and found that “women contributed 93 postings to the discussion; men submitted 64 postings” (p. 216). Furthermore, Graddy (2006) noted, there was “no evidence of a male crowding-out effect” (p. 211). Leisure (2007) completed her dissertation study of nine female doctoral graduate students and reported that online education helps women balance multiple roles and demands on their lives by offering flexibility, and “participants related no incidents occurring within the confines of their doctoral program that would suggest gender-related discrimination” (p. 109). Yet, she also reported a viable concern among these women earning an online doctoral degree that their credentials will be questioned, and the “degree will not be accepted or viewed as being of the same quality as one earned in a traditional brick and mortar institution” (p. 104). Reflecting on the study by Adams and DeFleur (2005), which was described in the summary of Table 1, the women were

justified in their concerns. However, the women also suggested that “completion of their doctoral degree programs has increased their level of self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-worth” (p. 107). The transformative aspect of online learning has not been fully explored in the research. Table 3 shows the studies which focus on transformational learning theory.

TABLE 3
Transformational Learning

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Bennetts, C. (2003). The impact of transformational learning on individuals, families and communities. <i>International Journal of Lifelong Education</i> , 22(5), 457-480.	This article is based on a larger study (Bennetts 2002) into the Second Chance Trust (SCT) and addresses one major finding from that study, that of transformational learning and its effect on 197 individuals, their close relationships, and their communities. The SCT offers money to those over the age of 30 in South West England to effect change within their lives for the benefit of the wider community. Individuals evaluated transformational learning by the extent of major changes in thinking, feeling, acting, relating and being. Significant transformations fell into the categories of self-transformation, coping with and instigating change in self and others, transformed relationships, increased educational drive, career improvement, and better quality of life. Significant transformations were enabled by giving relatively small grants to individuals within a trusting and supportive relationship. This study supports both Mezirow’s (1981) theory of perspective transformation and Boyd and Myers (1988) view of transformative education. Individuals’ transitions appear to have been sustained over the years by the knowledge that change is possible, necessary and rewarding. The transitions evolved through a cycle of evaluation of circumstances, assessment of learning need, and adaptation of the present pattern of life required to achieve the new goal. In this context, lifelong learning becomes the norm, a process not a discrete educational event. Sustainability thus becomes the continued ability to learn from change and does not denote a static state.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perspective transformation and change resulting from learning was shown to be sustained over a period of years. • Significant transformations fell into the categories of “self-transformation, coping with and instigating change in self and others, transformed relationships, increased educational drive, career improvement, and better quality of life” (p. 457).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
McWhinney, W., & Markos, L. (2003). Transformative education across the threshold. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 1(1), 16-37.	The human condition has changed radically in the past 100 years. Educational institutions, formal and informal, have not kept pace with technological innovations, the lengthening life span, or the need for ongoing reeducation to reinvigorate lives. The authors distinguish between learning and education and, more significantly, between transformative learning and transformative education. They then introduce the path of transformative education following a Navaho healing ritual that illuminates the mega-myth of death and rebirth as a model on which to organize ideas of adult transformative education across an extended life span. The purpose is to highlight the need for a fourth level of education suitable to 21st-century society, and to engage a global, cross-disciplinary dialogue to inform transformative educational practice across its personal, productive, instrumental, emancipatory, and holistic goals.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authors described the evolution of transformative education and compared it to a Navaho healing ritual about death and rebirth. • “Transformations in individuals or whole groups can be disturbing to people for whom the status quo is the desired condition” (p. 20). • Transformation is often preceded by loss...”loss of support for what has been, or the awareness that one can no longer turn back” (p. 21). • “Crisis unfreezes the person to accept the loss and begin a search that takes one across the threshold into a space where one can risk deep exploration, a space in which the exploration is free of immediate threats and consequences” (p. 21). • This place is liminal, a place that is on the threshold but neither here nor there. • “There, learning transforms in radical, irreversible, and often unexpected ways” (p. 21). • Four goals for transformative paths are: 1)productive and instrumental – “enhancement of one’s career opportunities” (p. 31); 2) personal – “the personal argument for transformational experience loss, liminality, and return...due to changes in personal circumstances” (p. 32); 3) emancipatory – “social transformation...education in the service of society, rather than...transformation of individuals” (p. 33); and 4) holistic – spiritual and eonological evolution – “the most ancient of transformations are those in search of spirit and a holistic engagement with the natural environment” (p. 34).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Cranton, P., & Roy, M. (2003). When the bottom falls out of the bucket: Toward a holistic perspective on transformative learning. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 1(2), 86-98.	Transformative learning theory has been fragmented in a variety of ways. There has been debate between those who view it as a cognitive, rational process and those who prefer an imaginative, extrarational interpretation. Some scholars emphasize the affective component of the journey; some see social action as preceding individual change. Perspectives such as those from depth psychology and humanism have much to contribute to transformative learning theory. What we attempt to do in this article is to bring together some of the various perspectives on transformative learning and integrate them through the concepts of individuation and authenticity. We hope that this initiative will lead other theorists and writers to continue to contemplate how we can build a holistic perspective of transformative learning theory.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authors expounded on various perspectives on transformative learning, individuation, and authenticity. • Habits of mind are the broad predispositions that we use to interpret experience. These include: epistemic – the way we come to know things and the way we use that knowledge; sociolinguistic – the way we view social norms, culture, and how we use language; psychological – our self-concept, personality, emotional responses, and personal images and dreams; moral-ethical – our conscience and morality; philosophical – religious doctrine or world view; and aesthetic – our tastes and standards about beauty. • The three kinds of knowledge include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. instrumental knowledge (p. 88) 2. practical or communicative (p. 89) 3. emancipatory (p. 89) • “Individuation is the <i>process</i> by which we become aware of who we are as different from others” (p. 91). • “Authenticity is the expression of the genuine self in the community” (p. 94).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
King, K. P. (2004). Both sides now: Examining transformative learning and professional development of educators. <i>Higher Education</i> , 29(2), 155-174.	The purpose of this mixed method research is to understand and support educators' continuing learning and growth better by using a lens of transformative learning to examine their experience and professional development practice and responsibility. Data from 58 participants and the course professor are analyzed to consider the occurrence of transformative learning and the related needs that emerged. This article also presents trends across the learning experiences and recommendations for practice and responsibility. Additionally, there are implications of the research for higher education professors, administrators, and developers reflecting on their concepts and planning of formal professional development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King (2004) conducted a mixed method research study and analyzed data from 58 adult educators in graduate courses in adult education and the professor's viewpoints and teaching experiences. • Trends in transformational changes among the participants "entailed the adoption of a more inclusive view of themselves, others, and their world" (p. 169). • "Primary influences in creating environments and experiences where educators may experience perspective transformation included critical reflection, active learning, dialogue, and support" (p. 169). • Educators should provide professional development "environments that cultivate freedom for critical questioning, reflective learning, and discussing and adopting new ideas" (p. 169).
Lange, E. (2004). Transformative and restorative learning: A vital dialectic for sustainable societies. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 54(2), 121-139.	This study explores the potential of critical transformative learning for revitalizing citizen action, particularly action toward a sustainable society. Through an action research process with fourteen university extension participants, it was found that a dialectic of transformative and restorative learning is vital for fostering active citizenship. This study also found that transformation is not just an epistemological process involving a change in worldview and habits of thinking; it is also an ontological process where participants experienced a change in their being in the world. As participants shifted into a new mode of relatedness with their material, social, and environmental realities, they sought avenues for socially responsible involvement as active citizens.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "A second aspect of transformation was the shift from the mode of having to the mode of being" (p. 132). • "The dialectic of transformative and restorative learning is vital, for it affirms that transformation is not just an epistemological process involving a change in worldview and habits of thinking; it is also an ontological process where participants experienced a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness" (p. 137).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Merriam, S. B. (2004, November). The role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory. <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 55(1), 60-68.	The link between development and learning is explicit in Mezirow's theory of transformational learning. Indeed, numerous studies have documented that growth and development are outcomes of transformational learning. What has not been questioned, and what is argued in this Forum article, is that it appears one must already be at a mature level of cognitive functioning to engage in the transformational learning process. For transformational learning to occur, one must be able to critically reflect and engage in rational discourse; both of these activities are characteristic of higher levels of cognitive functioning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transformational learning goes beyond personal development. • Transformational learning is accompanied by higher levels of cognitive ability in the form of critical reflection and discourse.
Mezirow, J. (2004, November). Forum comment on Sharan Merriam's "the role of cognitive development in Mezirow's transformational learning theory". <i>Adult Education Quarterly</i> , 55(1), 69-70.	None provided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The fully developed learner moves through a series of developmental forms to arrive at the highest potential for understanding - the <i>capacity</i> to engage in transformative learning" (Mezirow, 2004, p. 69).
Moore, M. J. (2005). The transtheoretical model of the stages of change and the phases of transformative learning: Comparing two theories of transformational change. <i>Journal of Transformative Education</i> , 3(4), 394-415.	Prochaska and colleagues' transtheoretical model (TTM) describes a sequential progression of six stages individuals advance through as they commence the self-change process of altering behaviors. Mezirow and his associates offer ten phases of perspective transformation from their theory of transformative learning, known as transformational learning theory (TLT). This theory explains how adults interpret life experiences, make meaning, and change a belief, an attitude, or an entire perspective. A change in perspective is personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted one's life. Both theories offer schemes of learning, changing, and growing for people seeking to make meaningful, life-transforming changes. This article provides a brief overview of each model and attempts to integrate these models to explain the process of transformational, or emancipatory, change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparison of Mezirow's ten phases of perspective transformation known as transformational learning theory (TLT) to transtheoretical model (TTM). • TTM "explains how adults interpret life experiences, make meaning, and change a belief, an attitude, or an entire perspective. A change in perspective is personally emancipating in that one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted one's life" (Moore, 2005, p. 394). • "The goals of TLT are to achieve self-emancipation through self-knowledge, overcome systematically induced distortions of perception and communication, and strengthen one's autonomy through rational discourse" (Moore, 2005, p. 401).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Boyer, N. R., Maher, P. A., & Kirkman, S. (2006). Transformative learning in online settings: The use of self-direction, metacognition, and collaborative learning. <i>Journal of Transformative Education, 4</i> (4), 335-361.	The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to validate the findings from a previous exploratory study of transformative learning in a specific, primarily online, graduate course model. This study involved the systematic content analysis of the graduate students' reflective writings collected at specific intervals throughout each course semester. Construct validity of the content analysis was strengthened through the application of a coding rubric and data analysis triangulated across three researchers. The final results indicate that the phases of transformative learning were repeatedly evident in students' reflective discussion comments and that fundamental changes in preconceived ideas, beliefs, habits, or assumptions had occurred for approximately one fourth of the participants around the themes of course workload, fear of or incompetence with technology, social role priorities, the online self-directed course format, and collaborative learning. The instructor role was found to be a vital component in the facilitation of transformative learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers using a qualitative phenomenological research study of transformative learning of 59 students who were enrolled in a primarily online, graduate course in educational leadership found evidence of transformative learning. • Factors known to foster transformative learning were provided by the course facilitator: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ timely substantial feedback to all questions, concerns, and work submissions, ○ developed rubrics so they [students] would have accurate information and a clear picture of their work products and skills, ○ students were invited and encouraged to engage in reflection and dialogue with the instructor and fellow students.
Cranton, P. (2006). Fostering authentic relationships in the transformative classroom. <i>New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, 109</i> , 5-13.	Authentic relationships between teacher and student form a central process in transformative learning in the classroom. Based on research and theory, this chapter provides practical strategies for educators looking to foster authentic relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The instructor, or authority figure, may influence students' "examination of previously uncritically absorbed values and assumptions" (p. 12).

TABLE 3 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: transformational learning; transformative learning</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Taylor, E. W. (2007). An update of transformative learning theory: A critical review of the empirical research (1999-2005). <i>International Journal of Lifelong Education</i> , 26(2), 173-191.	The last significant review of research about transformative learning was in 1998 and was mostly focused on unpublished dissertations. In response, this paper reviews an exhaustive body of research conducted since that time, involving 40 studies, published in peer-review journals with a lens of analysis of new findings and insights on transformative learning theory. The review finds less research less about identifying transformative experiences in different setting, and more about fostering transformative learning and the complex nature of critical reflection, relationships, the nature of a perspective transformation and the role of context. Furthermore, even though qualitative designs still dominate, they have become more sophisticated and creative, including longitudinal and mixed-method designs and the use of video and photography.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Edward W. Taylor reviewed 40 transformative learning research studies published in peer-review journals “with a lens of analysis of new findings and insights on transformative learning theory” (abstract, p. 173). • Major trends: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “The majority of studies “continue to employ qualitative research designs” (p. 176). ○ “A second trend...is the emerging use of action research and transformative learning” (p. 177). ○ “A third trend is the growing number of studies that involve the use of scales, surveys, and/or open-ended questionnaires in the study of transformative learning” (p. 177). • Current research confirms Mezirow’s conception of transformative learning. • “Finally, there is little understood about the impact of transformative learning on learner outcomes” (p. 187). • “There is still much that is not known about transformative learning and much to learn about how people revise their interpretations about the world around them” (p. 189).

Summary of Table 3

Before summarizing the most current literature on Transformation Learning Theory, a brief synopsis of the beginnings of this theory should be shared.

The movement was initiated in 1978 by the publication of an ambitious study of women returning to community college after an extended hiatus (Mezirow, 1978)... The major theoretical finding of the study was the identification of *perspective transformation* as the central learning process occurring in the personal development of women participating in these college programs. By becoming critically aware of the context – biographical, historical, cultural – of their beliefs and feelings about themselves and their role in society, the women could effect a change in the way they had tacitly structured their assumptions and expectations. This change constituted a learned transformation; the process resulting from it was designated transformative learning ... the idea of reflection as a form of self-formation that emancipates as it dissolves the constraining spell of unexamined beliefs – all became building blocks for Transformation Theory. (Mezirow, 2000, p. xi-xii)

Findings in current literature about Transformation Learning Theory served to inform this study and reiterate the transformative aspects of learning for some adult learners. Bennetts (2003) studied the effects of transformational learning on 197 individuals, and findings led the author to suggest there was significant transformation within the individuals in the form of “self-transformation, coping with and instigating change in self and others, transformed relationships, increased educational drive, career improvement, and better quality of life” (p. 457). McWhinney and Markos (2003) noted four goals for transformative paths: productive and instrumental – “a highly visible form of transformative education is the enhancement of one’s career opportunities” (p. 31;

personal – “the personal argument for transformational experience, the classic path of loss, liminality, and return, is embarked on due to changes in personal circumstances” (p. 32); emancipatory – “emancipatory education has goals of social transformation. It is education in the service of society, rather than an intended transformation of the involved individuals” (p. 33); and holistic – spiritual and ecological evolution – “the most ancient of transformations are those in search of spirit and a holistic engagement with the natural environment” (p. 34).

Cranton and Roy (2003) categorized transformative learning in terms of habits of mind, or predispositions, that we use to interpret experience; these include:

- epistemic – the way we come to know things and the way we use that knowledge;
- sociolinguistic – the way we view social norms, culture, and how we use language;
- psychological – our self-concept, personality, emotional responses, and personal images and dreams;
- moral-ethical – our conscience and morality;
- philosophical – religious doctrine or world view; and
- aesthetic – our tastes and standards about beauty.

Cranton and Roy (2003) also defined authenticity as follows:

Authenticity is the expression of the genuine self in the community. To create that genuine self, we need to critically participate in life rather than run with the unconscious herd. Part of this journey is understanding how others are different

from us without attempting to make them into our own image; that is, we help others discover their authenticity as a way of fostering our own authenticity. (p. 94)

King (2004) conducted a mixed method research study and analyzed data from 58 adults in adult educator graduate courses as well as the instructor, and she recommended professional development environments “that cultivate freedom for critical questioning, reflective learning, and discussing and adopting new ideas” (p. 169). Lange (2004) explored “the shift from the mode of having to the mode of being” (p. 132). Her action research of fourteen university extension participants provided insight into transformative learning as “a change in worldview and habits of thinking: it is also an ontological process where participants experienced a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness” (p. 137).

Merriam (2004) posited that transformational learning requires higher levels of cognitive functioning for critical thinking and rational discourse. Mezirow (2004) responded, “The fully developed learner moves through a series of developmental forms to arrive at the highest potential for understanding – the *capacity* to engage in transformative learning” (p. 69). Moore (2005) compared the ten phases of perspective transformation known as transformational learning theory (TLT) to transtheoretical model (TTM). The goals of transformational learning theory are “self-emancipation through self-knowledge, overcome systematically induced distortions of perception and communication, and strengthen one’s autonomy through rational discourse” (Moore, 2005, p. 401).

As transformational learning theory has been further studied and applied in recent years, it has also been used to examine learners in online courses. Boyer, Maher, & Kirkman (2006) used a qualitative phenomenological research model to study 59 students enrolled in a primarily online graduate course. Evidence of transformation was “embedded within students’ reflective discussions; . . . fundamental changes in their established ideas, beliefs, habits, or assumptions had occurred” (p. 351). Boyer et al. (2006) also found that the facilitator of the course encouraged transformation in that the instructor provided timely substantial feedback to all questions, concerns, and work submissions, developed rubrics so they [students] would have accurate information and a clear picture of their work products and skills, and invited students to engage in reflection and dialogue with the instructor and fellow students.

Taylor (2007) reviewed 40 transformative learning research studies published in peer-review journals, and reported, “The most significant change found in this review was the greater attention given to the practice of fostering transformative learning in the higher education classroom or a workshop setting” (p. 181). He added:

Another medium that also involves a great deal of writing is the online setting (Cragg et al., 2001; Zieghan, 2001). Although these studies are only initial efforts with few significant findings, factors that seem to contribute to the transformative experience while online are the degree of life experience among the participants and the significance of having time to reflect on ‘written accounts of the intellectual and emotional connections’ (Zieghan, 2001, p. 149) during asynchronous discussions. The greater life experience provides a ‘deeper

well' from which to draw upon and react to discussions that emerged among online participants. (Taylor, 2007, pp. 182-183)

Taylor (2007) also noted:

The present research continues to affirm Mezirow's conception of transformative learning, through its stability over time, its relationship to expanding the self and pursuit of autonomy, and the applicability for informing classroom practice. However, it has shifted its focus away from identifying transformative experience in various settings and stages of transformation, and more towards making sense of factors that shape the transformative experience and how it can be fostered in practice. (p. 185)

Finally, Taylor (2007) suggested, "there is little understood about the impact of transformative learning on learner outcomes" (p. 187). For this purpose, there is scrutiny of the particular nature of transformational learning experiences for women in Table 4.

TABLE 4
Transformational Learning Experiences for Women

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i> <i>wom?n and transformational;</i> <i>wom?n and transformative;</i> <i>gender and transformational;</i> <i>gender and transformative;</i> <i>female and transformational;</i> <i>female and transformative</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Kennedy, R. J. M. (2002). Retrospection on a baccalaureate degree in mid-life: What does it mean in a woman's life? <i>Dissertation Abstracts International</i>, 63(5), 130. (UMI No. 3054056)</p> <p>(This document was an exception to the normal date range of 2003 to 2007. This document was located during a search of the UMI Dissertation Database and is included because of its high relevance to this study. The abstract was abbreviated for placement in this table.)</p>	<p>A national higher education public policy agenda enmeshed in economic issues threatens to diminish access and disregard the baccalaureate educational needs of women in midlife. The numbers of adult women attaining bachelor's degrees continues to rise despite societal rewards that favor men in salary and position. Yet, the meaning and consequences of baccalaureate attainment among women who earn degrees in midlife is unarticulated in the public policy arena. An uninformed national higher education public policy agenda threatens to limit adult women from accessing higher education and deprives society of the contributions women have the potential to make. To address this issue, this phenomenological study of eight women explored the meanings and consequences of a baccalaureate in the life experiences of women nine to 22 years after midlife degree attainment. Through higher education experiences, a majority of women were affirmed and nourished through relationships with others, grew in esteem and development of authentic selves, generated expectations for college completion in relationships with others, and experienced perspective transformations relevant to relationships critical to them. The formal higher education experience in some way was integral to change in the lives of all of the women. Findings suggest perspective transformation occurred for some, but not for all of the women. Perspective transformation was directly or indirectly tied to baccalaureate degree pursuit or attainment. For a woman whose worldview shifted, the change in the way she thought about her life was emancipatory.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kennedy conducted a phenomenological study of eight women nine to 22 years after midlife baccalaureate degree attainment. • The study explored the meanings and consequences of earning a degree and indicated a majority of the women gained self-esteem and perspective transformations. • "Initially, all of the women had expected baccalaureate degree attainment to improve career and advancement opportunities as well as salary levels. In the years since graduation, six of eight moved up in salary and career level.... Of the six who advanced, five earned graduate degrees and three of those five also earned credentials required in chosen professions. Two of the five with graduate degrees earned doctorates and two more pursued doctorates" (p. 106). • The two who earned doctorates "earned salaries commensurate with position levels. Doctoral credentials built on the foundational baccalaureate degree base factored into career advancement and salaries" (p. 107).

TABLE 4 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms: wom?n and transformational; wom?n and transformative; gender and transformational; gender and transformative; female and transformational; female and transformative</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Wagner, A., & Magnusson, J. L. (2005). Neglected realities: Exploring the impact of women's experiences of violence on learning in sites of higher education. <i>Gender and Education, 17</i> (4), 449-461.	Feminist pedagogy offers an exciting alternative to more conservative, traditional academic approaches, as it offers a site where women's lives and experiences are accorded a place of importance and are considered worthy of theorizing. Within the last decade, feminism has been increasingly challenged to broaden its perspective and include the standpoints of those who are not part of the dominant group, whose voices have been traditionally silenced within academia. Issues of race, class, sexuality and ability have subsequently become a core focus of most women's studies classrooms. Yet despite its transformative goals and sometimes radical pedagogical practices, these spaces often remain complicit in not fully acknowledging the impact of trauma on women's lives. Drawing on the journal entries of first year social work students, this inquiry explores the impact of trauma on three women, struggling to negotiate the demands of academia, while simultaneously coping with memories of past abuse. It is argued that violence against women is a collective responsibility, rather than an individual pathology, as it has been conceptualized in the past. The findings highlight the need to address women's experiences of violence as a legitimate barrier to learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wagner and Magnusson presented an analysis of the trauma of women learners who have experienced physical and/or sexual victimization. • Higher education has not acknowledged the status of some women as survivors of physical or sexual victimization. • Victims fear identification of themselves as survivors will lead to labeling which overshadows all other facets of their identity. • Ramifications of victimization and violence are felt for years. • There is a "culture of silence" (p. 453) in academia regarding victimization of women. • Universities could help by acknowledging the rate at which women of all classes and races are victimized. • Every classroom will likely have a significant percentage of women who have experienced trauma. • "Although they may enact a variety of coping strategies in order to both cope and maintain the secrecy of their identities as survivors, the associated costs are great. The emotional and physical toll of such heroic efforts may be expected to have lasting effects on these women" (p. 459).

TABLE 4 continued

*Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and transformational;
wom?n and transformative;
gender and transformational;
gender and transformative;
female and transformational;
female and transformative*

<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Stromquist, N. P. (2006). Gender, education and the possibility of transformative knowledge. <i>Compare: A Journal of Comparative Education</i> , 36(2), 145-161.	Global policies today encourage greater access by women to formal schooling but leave aside issues of content and school practices essential to the modification of the social relations of gender. This article assumes a holistic approach and compares the promise of education with its actual contribution to transformative knowledge. It examines why education is upheld as such a promising mechanism, despite the numerous obstacles it faces given contemporary developments, particularly the increasing pressures of globalization that move steadily weakened nation-states away from interventions to foster social justice. Lack of consensus within the women's and feminist movements, limited efforts to change teacher training programs and scant attention to the work of women-led non governmental organizations (NGOs) in the provision of alternative education are identified as key elements in need of attention if transformative knowledge is to be secured.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “The acquisition of intellectual skills and habits by women is conducive to social change” (p. 149). ○ Learning, reflecting, analyzing, and drawing conclusions helps women see beyond their immediate environment and transform their lives. ○ Educated women are more capable of making informed decisions regarding family, the labor market, and political participation. ○ Women need education to become individually and socially aware. “Women need education to find forms of personal and collective awareness and, after being so prepared, to demand their rights as human rights” (p. 150).

Summary of Table 4

Through the years, transformational learning has been studied among different groups of adult learners. One of those special populations is women in online learning. Significantly, it was pointed out by Wagner and Magnusson (2005) that in every classroom, there “will likely be a significant percentage of women who have experienced trauma” (p. 459). Currently, there is a culture of silence in academia regarding the prevalence of physical and sexual victimization of women. Wagner and

Magnusson (2005) suggested, “Given this culture of silence within the university, we may imagine the pressure under which both faculty and students find themselves to deny the effects of trauma” (p. 453).

Kennedy (2002) documented in her doctoral dissertation study the personal and transformational outcomes for women earning a baccalaureate degree in mid-life:

Initially, all of the women had expected baccalaureate degree attainment to improve career and advancement opportunities as well as salary levels. In the years since graduation, six of eight moved up in salary and career level. . . . Of the six who advanced, five earned graduate degrees and three of those five also earned credentials required in chosen professions. Two of the five with graduate degrees earned doctorates and two more pursued doctorates. The two who earned doctorates earned salaries commensurate with position levels. Doctoral credentials built on the foundational baccalaureate degree base factored into career advancement and salaries. (pp. 106-107)

In addition to personal development, some participants who “renegotiated or disconnected from oppressive or limiting primary relationships incrementally arrived at a perspective transformation” (Kennedy, 2002, p. vii). One of the participants in the study said earning the degree “was my first measure of success....It was the first time in my life that I actually did something that I wanted to do and completed it” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 108). Another participant commented, “I affirmed the fact that I was a real person, that I exist....The bachelor’s degree...what it did for me was prove I was a person” (Kennedy, 2002, p. 109). Kennedy (2002) also suggested:

The findings indicate midlife baccalaureate educated women are parlaying degrees into careers providing economic gain to society at large, encouraging others to attain degrees, and becoming more widely involved participants and contributors to society. A public policy higher education agenda responsive to the contributions midlife baccalaureate degreed women are making in society will design and implement strategies to increase the numbers of women accessing higher education and will develop strategies to curtail underutilization of women in the marketplace. (Kennedy, 2002, pp. vii-viii)

Findings indicated the potential for transformation as women complete a bachelor's degree, experience affirmation of themselves as individuals, and seek opportunities to continue their education and, thus, continued affirmation, personal and professional development, and transformation.

Stromquist (2006), following an examination of the promises of education versus actual contribution to transformative knowledge, posited:

A vast literature finds that educated women are more able than non-educated women to make informed decisions pertaining to marriage, family size and child health and better prepared to join the labor market and engage in political participation....The power to reflect, calculate, analyze, draw conclusions and see beyond the immediate environment has helped many women to analyze their realities and subsequently to devise means to transform their lives. (p. 149)

Thus, literature regarding career outcomes for women earning a degree is discussed in Table 5.

TABLE 5
Career Outcomes for Women Earning Degrees

Abstract copied from article and key terms:
wom?n and career and degree;
females and career and degree;
wom?n and attainment;
wom?n and attainment and achievement;
wom?n or females and education and attainment

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Kingston, P. W., Hubbard, R., Lapp, B., Schroeder, P., Wilson, J. (2003). Why education matters. <i>Sociology of Education</i>, 76(1), 53-70.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of this study was to explore why educational attainment is consequential. • Researchers focused on five areas: commitments to civil liberties, attitudes toward gender equality, endowments of social capital, participation in elite culture, and civic knowledge. • Education provides credentials used by gatekeepers to “identify the desired group and exclude others” (p. 55). • “If education is the well-recognized creator of life chances, we should expect people to adapt their lives accordingly” (p. 55). • “Cognitive ability is related to the acquisition of specific skills (e.g., speaking ability) and personal dispositions (e.g., self-confidence) that, in turn, affect social outcomes” (p. 56). • “The more educated are more supportive of an expanded, nontraditional role for women” (p. 58). • Education often matters in ways, and for reasons “we cannot explain” (p. 68).

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i> wom?n and career and degree; females and career and degree; wom?n and attainment; wom?n and attainment and achievement: wom?n or females and education and attainment	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Mahitivanichcha, K. (2003). Beyond education and market access: Gender differences in how human capital and ability translate into market outcomes. <i>Dissertation Abstracts International</i> , 64(12), 281. (UMI No. 3116113)	Although the gender gap in educational attainment has significantly narrowed and women have gained access to higher paying professions in greater numbers, it remains uncertain what their occupational outcomes look like beyond labor market entry. Despite the multitude of market opportunities such progress in human capital accumulation presumably affords, women's educational outcomes, particularly economic return to education, remain persistently different from those of their male counterparts. The study sets out to examine this problem, applying perspectives from the human capital theory and feminist theories. More specifically, it addresses the following questions: Are there gender differences in how human capital and ability translate into market outcomes? In a relatively homogenous sample where men's and women's abilities do not significantly differ, do their earnings look different? If so, why? In a sample of women with high earning potential, what influences their work and career decisions? Do such influences differ for their male counterparts? The study relies on quantitative and qualitative survey data gathered from male and female graduates of the Harvard Class of 1986 fifteen years after college. Despite the high degree of homogeneity within the sample, it was found that significant gender differences exist in their market outcomes (primarily measured by earnings), occupational decisions, and employment sectors. Given the family care arrangements within their households, women's career decisions and outcomes are more constrained by market conditions and occupational structures, relative to their male counterparts. Given that this is a privileged sample of men and women, the findings may not be generalizable. However, the results in this study may be an important measure of how far we have come and how much further we have to go as a society in creating career opportunities for women in the market. In addition, the findings in this study may offer some insights into the rhetoric versus reality of market promises associated with educational investment, and the extent to which educational opportunities translate into labor market opportunities. It may also bring to light some market barriers that undermine the efforts of educators within the academic institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative and qualitative study of male and female graduates of the Harvard Class of 1986 fifteen years after college. • Significant gender differences exist in their market outcomes (primarily measured by earnings, occupational decisions, and employment sectors). • Women's career decisions and outcomes are more constrained by market conditions and occupational structures, relative to male counterparts. • Women do not expect, nor hope, to make the same amount as men expect and hope to make at the peak of their career.

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i> wom?n and career and degree; females and career and degree; wom?n and attainment; wom?n and attainment and achievement: wom?n or females and education and attainment	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Mihelich, J., & Storrs, D. (2003). Higher education and the negotiated process of hegemony: Embedded resistance among morman women. <i>Gender & Society</i> , 17(3), 404-422.	This article examines how 20 female college students who identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) negotiated its gender ideology to legitimate their educational goals. The young LDS women creatively employed equality, professionalism, and essentialist discourses to craft a coherent identity as a “good LDS woman” that incorporated their pursuit of higher education. Beyond providing an in-depth look at how college-age LDS women “do gender,” the analysis informs our understanding of the persistence of women’s participation in patriarchal religious institutions, the process of women’s resistance, and women’s role in the negotiated process of hegemony. The authors argue that while women embrace the LDS gender ideology of womanhood, their pursuit of higher education is a form of resistance – embedded resistance – often neglected by scholars. The findings suggest the importance of nomos and meaning in understanding women’s participation in and manipulation of patriarchal religious institutions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An examination of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) construction of hegemony, as exhibited by 20 female members of LDS. • They employed an ideology of resistance in order to pursue an education prior to marriage and child-bearing. • Women pursuing an education prior to marriage and child-bearing, however, are seen as “somewhat on the fringes of LDS womanhood” (p. 419). • “Our analysis reveals a form of resistance, embedded resistance, which is part of the overall process of hegemonic change and acknowledges the significance of the agency demonstrated by women fully embedded in the hegemonic culture” (p. 419).
Mickelson, R. A. (2003). Gender, bordieu, and the anomaly of women’s achievement redux. <i>Sociology of Education</i> , 76(4), 373-375.	None provided.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women are taught to weave all components of their lives together as a continuum rather than as a dichotomy. In order to balance family and work, they often choose careers that demand less time commitment. • Achievement of women in education is not an anomaly. “Women’s educational success appears anomalous <i>only</i> if we seek to understand it by relying on theories of action that are based on the worldviews (habitus) and life circumstances (field) of men” (p. 374). • Women evaluate returns to education in terms of education’s potential to enhance life for themselves and their families.

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i>		
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	females and career and degree;	
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	wom?n and attainment and achievement:	
	wom?n or females and education and attainment	
<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Mullen, A. L., Goyette, K. A., & Soares, J. A. (2003). Who goes to graduate school? Social and academic correlates of educational continuation after college. <i>Sociology of Education</i> , 76(2), 143-169.	Although sociologists have found direct links between parents' education and the high school and college educational attainments of their offspring, researchers have been surprised to find no parental effects on educational enrollments beyond college. Postgraduate matriculation appears to result from academic success in college, divorced from parents' educational capital. Using new data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study, the authors reexamine this issue and extend the literature by disaggregating graduate programs by type. They find that parents' education has no effect on their children's entry into MBA programs and only a small influence on entry into master's programs; however, there is a strong effect of parents' education on entry into first-professional and doctoral programs. The role of parental education is largely indirect, working primarily through the characteristics of a student's undergraduate institution, academic performance, educational expectations, and career values. In addition, college performance maintains a strong, independent effect on enrollment in graduate school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents' level of education greatly influences educational attainment of their children, especially on entry into first-professional and doctoral programs. • "The odds of entering master's programs are greater for women than for men, but the odds of entering all other types of programs are much stronger for men" (p. 150). • "Students from less-privileged backgrounds tend to be older at graduation from college than do those from more privileged backgrounds" (p. 150). • "A student whose parent has more than a college degree has the greatest probability of attending graduate school" (p. 160). • However, performance as an undergraduate is a significant determinant of postgraduate enrollment independent of parent's educational background.

TABLE 5 continued

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females and career and degree;
wom?n and attainment;
wom?n and attainment and achievement:
wom?n or females and education and attainment

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Jarrell, S. B., & Stanley, T. D. (2004). Declining bias and gender wage discrimination? A mega-regression analysis. <i>The Journal of Human Resources</i>, 39(3), 828-838.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This study investigated previous analyses of gender wage discrimination. Researchers found “there is a strong trend for the estimates of wage discrimination to decline” (p. 836). • Women experience discrimination in pay, yet there is great variability among estimates of gender discrimination. • “When estimating discrimination, only the wages of <i>employed</i> workers can be observed and used. With gender wage discrimination, the market undervalues women’s skills, education, and productivity. Hence, they will ‘rationally’ and disproportionately choose not to enter the labor force” (p. 835).

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i>		
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<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Maume, D. J. (2004). Is the glass ceiling a unique form of inequality? Evidence from a random-effects model of managerial attainment. <i>Work and Occupations</i>, 31(2), 250-274.</p>	<p>A recent paper by Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vanneman explicates four criteria for distinguishing the glass ceiling as a unique form of inequality. First, a glass ceiling exists when artificial barriers impede the advancement of women and minorities, and second, these barriers are more severe at higher occupational levels. Third, the glass ceiling must be investigated with longitudinal data, and fourth, a glass ceiling is manifested in increasing inequality over the life course. This paper extended these criteria by conducting a longitudinal analysis of managerial attainment (satisfying the second and third criteria). The presence of artificial barriers was assessed by estimating the salience of race and gender to the process of managerial attainment. Additional estimations showed that the gap in managerial attainment between White men and other groups grew over the life course. Thus, findings from this study do satisfy the Cotter et al. criteria regarding the existence and uniqueness of the glass ceiling. The paper concludes with a call for additional research.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maume examined four criteria for distinguishing the glass ceiling - artificial barriers meant to “impede the advancement of women and minorities” (p. 250). • The author “found evidence of disparate treatment against women and Blacks in holding a managerial position” (p. 267). • Key findings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Educational attainment is less of a determinant for advancement of women than are hours worked, general work experience, and employer tenure. ○ Employers stereotype women as unstable workers and believe that promoting them to management is riskier than promoting men. ○ In order for women to earn a promotion, they “have to maintain a continuous presence in the labor force, work long hours, and establish a long record of service to their employers (p. 260). ○ Children significantly impede attainment among White women., but not among Black women. • “White men prefer to promote managerial candidates who are socially similar to them” (p. 168).

TABLE 5 continued

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wom?n and career and degree;
females and career and degree;
wom?n and attainment;
wom?n and attainment and achievement;
wom?n or females and education and attainment

<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Smulyan, L. (2004). Redefining self and success: Becoming teachers and doctors. <i>Gender and Education</i> , 16(2), 225-245.	This study explores how twenty-eight women graduates of a liberal arts college renegotiate personal and professional identities over a ten year period. Approximately half of these women entered college planning to pursue a career in medicine; the other half indicated some interest in the field of education. Each participant was interviewed six times over the course of ten years. Analysis suggests that prior designations of women's careers as "traditional" (i.e. teaching) and "non-traditional" (i.e. medicine) no longer apply as women actively reconceptualize their lives, their identities, their definitions of success, and the meaning of their chosen career. Prior studies that examine the balancing of personal and professional lives also simplify a more complicated process experienced by women who explore multiple understandings of themselves within personal and social structures. The women in this study draw on the critical perspectives learned in college as they recognize and respond to competing social and cultural definitions and discourses of success, work, and self.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In a study of 28 women graduates of a liberal arts college over a ten year period, the researcher found that the women entered fields that would allow them to have families <i>and</i> legitimate, demanding careers (teaching and practicing medicine). • After being in their careers for four or five years, the women voiced concerns about work and family conflict . . . and a sense of being trapped. • "Their education provides them with the cultural capital and discursive frameworks needed to become a part of the academic, social and political (masculine hegemonic) norm. It also gives them a perspective from which they can, at least to some extent, examine themselves performing and constructing their identities within these norms" (p. 236). • College gave the women a vision of themselves in multiple roles and positions in the world. • Ten years into the study, the researcher expected to find women "settling down"; instead, the women were still in transition and in the process of defining themselves. More or less, they were caught between the two aspects of themselves.

TABLE 5 continued

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 wom?n and attainment and achievement:
 wom?n or females and education and attainment

<i>Citation</i>	<i>Summary of key points</i>
Compton, J. I., Cox, E., & Laanan, F. S. (2006). Adult learners in transition. <i>New Directions for Student Services, 114</i> , 73-80.	This chapter discusses the challenges, characteristics, and transitional roles of adult learners. Implications for student services professionals are presented. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Factors leading to the increasing number of adult and nontraditional students on our campuses and in our classrooms: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Of the 182 million individuals age 25 and older, 126 million have not completed an educational degree beyond a high school diploma” (p. 74). ○ Many adults no longer have the skills to become gainfully employed. ○ Changing social norms have prompted women to return to the workplace and, in turn, to enroll in higher education. ○ Many students return to higher education due to a major life transition.

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i>		
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<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Kendall, J. R., & Pogue, K. (2006). Survey of alumni from distance degree and campus-based baccalaureate programs. <i>The Quarterly Review of Distance Education</i> , 7(2), 155-164.	Responses of alumni enrolled in a distance and an on-campus program at a traditional land-grant university to a survey evaluating their academic experiences were compared. Results demonstrated that both groups of alumni were very satisfied with their education. Both groups responded similarly to questions about the university's contribution to their growth in a number of outcome areas. Distance alumni chose the distance program for personal and work-related reasons. Both groups of alumni plan to obtain additional education, and both were involved in similar types of volunteer service. Distance alumni indicated their undergraduate degrees had significant value for them both personally and professionally.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responses of a survey of alumni from distance degree baccalaureate programs, 80% of whom were female (p. 157), indicated that "as a result of earning the distance degree program (DDP) they felt ready for a career" (p. 159). • Alumni reported receiving a promotion (20%) from the same employer; receiving a promotion from a different employer (18%); and receiving monthly pay increases (39%). • "Over 90% of DDP alumni would definitely or probably earn their degree through a distance program if they did it over again" (p. 163). • The distance education format enabled alumni to fit courses into their schedules; maintain their commitments to families, communities and jobs; and increase their career options.
Quimby, J. L., & DeSantis, A. M. (2006). The influence of role models on women's career choices. <i>The Career Development Quarterly</i> , 54(4), 297-306.	This study of 368 female undergraduates examined self-efficacy and role model influence as predictors of career choice across J. L. Holland's (1997) six RIASEC (Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, Conventional) types. Findings showed that levels of self-efficacy and role model influences differed across Holland types. Multiple regression analyses indicated that self-efficacy and role model influence accounted for significant variance in career choice for all six RIASEC types. Role model influence added to the prediction of career choice over and above the contribution of self-efficacy in all but one of the RIASEC types. The importance of attention to role models in career counseling is discussed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers studied self-efficacy and role model influence as predictors of career choice among 368 female undergraduates. • Self-efficacy and role model influence accounted for significant variance in career choice. • The researchers suggested career counselors could utilize the Internet to connect women with inspirational role models.

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i>		
	wom?n and career and degree; females and career and degree; wom?n and attainment; wom?n and attainment and achievement: wom?n or females and education and attainment	
<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Ulloa, E. C., & Herrera, M. (2006). Strategies for multicultural student success: What about grad school? <i>The Career Development Quarterly</i> , 54(4), 361-366.	A workshop was presented to undergraduates as a collection of ethnic minority voices, which provided students an opportunity to participate in an ethnic minority focused event that encouraged mentoring relationships and created opportunities for the sharing of advice between ethnic minority undergraduate and graduate students. The workshop's goals and agenda and implications for counselors are described. The feedback from students was overwhelmingly positive. The authors believe that colleges and universities, and the ethnic minority students who attend them, would benefit greatly from the formal and structured implementation of a workshop series dedicated to encouraging graduate school as a post baccalaureate option.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this article, the authors encouraged mentoring relationships with an ethnic minority focus. • Although the number of minority students receiving baccalaureate degrees has risen, "the number of minority students entering graduate school has remained disproportionately small" (p. 361). • "Ethnic minorities often find that they feel isolated from their academic communities of practice" (p. 362).
Marschke, R., Laursen, S., Nielsen, J. M., & Rankin, P. (2007). Demographic inertia revisited: An immodest proposal to achieve equitable gender representation among faculty in higher education. <i>The Journal of Higher Education</i> , 78(1), 1-25.	Progress toward equitable gender representation among faculty in higher education has been "glacial" since the early 1970s (Glazer-Raymo, 1999; Lomperis, 1990; Trower & Chait, 2002). Women, who now make up a majority of undergraduate degree earners and approximately 46% of Ph.D. earners nationwide (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2003), rarely make up more than 30% of faculty at Research Extensive universities. Although the total number of tenure-track women faculty in higher education has increased steadily for the past 35 years, this increase and women's advancement through faculty ranks are described as excruciatingly slow (Valian, 1999).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Researchers conducting a study of ten annual cross-sections of full-time tenured or tenure track faculty employed at a four-year public Research I university between 1990 and 1999 found that women made up 37% of new hires, compared to 63% men. • New hires at the assistant rank were 41% male and 7% female. • New hires at the rank of associate professor rank were 11% male and 7% female. • New hires at the rank of full professor were 10% male and 3% female (p. 13). • The researchers found that at this "glacial" (p. 1) rate, the proportion of women faculty at this university would reach 30% in eighteen years.

TABLE 5 continued

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<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
<p>Sheran, M. (2007). The career and family choices of women: A dynamic analysis of labor force participation, schooling, marriage and fertility decisions. <i>Review of Economic Dynamics</i>, 10(3), 367-399.</p>	<p>This paper formulates and estimates a discrete time, discrete choice dynamic labor supply model in which marriage, fertility, and education are choice variables. The dynamics of these choices are captured by various forms of state and duration dependence. Uncertainty comes from the imperfect control women have over births and from a choice-specific random shock to utility each period. Women choose different career and family life-cycle paths because of these uncertainties and also because they have different tastes. The structural parameters of the model are estimated using maximum likelihood estimation techniques with data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women would stay in school longer, work more in the labor market, and spend a smaller fraction of their lives married if the return to education was increased. • Women would work in the labor market more, spend a greater fraction of their lives married, and use birth control less frequently if the cost of childcare was decreased. • Ignoring the interdependences between women's career and family choices could, therefore, lead to incomplete forecasts of some policy changes.

TABLE 5 continued

<i>Abstract copied from article and key terms:</i>		
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	wom?n or females and education and attainment	
<i>Citation</i>		<i>Summary of key points</i>
Whitmarsh, L., Brown, D., Cooper, J., Hawkins-Rodgers, Y., & Wentworth, D. K. (2007). Choices and challenges: A qualitative exploration of professional women's career patterns. <i>The Career Development Quarterly</i> , 55(3), 225-236.	With the rapid changes occurring in the role of work in women's lives, this research project was designed to examine the career planning, career decision making, and work history of women in both female-dominated and gender-neutral careers (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.-a). A qualitative analysis of structured interviews identified six emerging themes: variations of career/family patterns, career encouragers, career obstacles, personal compromises, career changes, and career decision making patterns. Insights for strengthening the exploration process and strategies for supporting career management are presented based on the emerging themes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women in female-dominated careers received encouragement from parents; women in gender-circumscribed roles indicated support from educators, counselors, coworkers, bosses, and spouses. • Women in female-dominated careers did not face obstacles in their career paths as did women in gender-neutral careers who lacked skills to negotiate promotion or deal with sexual harassment. • "Women in gender-neutral careers made personal compromises more frequently than did the women in female-dominated careers" (p. 231). • Women changing from a female-dominated career to a gender-neutral career after continuing education gained confidence. • Women often chose female-dominated careers based on influence from their mothers and female relatives. • Participants who chose gender-neutral careers explored options and made decisions interactions with college classmates, professors, mentors, and bosses.

Summary of Table 5

The literature supports the existence of constraints on women as they seek to balance a career and family. Gender differences still exist in the marketplace, "primarily measured by earnings, occupational decisions, and employment sectors" (Mahitivanichcha, 2003,

p. ix). One remarkable indicator of the career outcomes for women is the difference between what women expect and hope to earn at the height of their career as compared to expected and hoped for earnings by men.

Figures suggest that women expect to make 48% of what men expect to make and hope to make 60% of what men hope to make at the peak of their career....Women expect to earn much less than men at mid-career as well as at the peak of their career. (Mahitivanichcha, 2003, p. 130)

While “money is one of the common factors that influence men’s career changes...this is however not the case among women” (Mahitivanichcha, 2003, p. 152). Many of the female participants reported they “substituted pay for more balanced schedules” (p. 152).

Mickelson (2003) asked, “Given the relatively weaker wage and status rewards for their school success, why do women continue to obtain more education credentials than do men?” (p. 373). Research indicated that women “are socialized to approach their lives by weaving public and private roles into a single tapestry....Doing so often means choosing careers...that complement family roles while precluding high-status jobs that offer large salaries but require enormous time commitments” (Mickelson, 2003, p. 374). Mickelson (2003) also added that “women evaluate returns to education in terms not only of the income, status, and careers it brings, but of their education’s potential to enhance the quality of the personal, familial, and community lives” (p. 375). Also, according to Sheran (2007), women face great uncertainty in their pursuit and attainment of education due to the “imperfect control women have over births. . . . Women choose different career and family life-cycle paths because of these uncertainties” (p. 367).

Compton, Cox, and Laanan (2006) found the following to be true in their examination of adult learners:

The final factor, the changing norms in society, is perhaps the single most important contributor for the number of adult women who have enrolled in postsecondary education. No longer is it the norm for women to stay in the home and be full-time mothers and housewives – many families would not be able to support that notion economically even if they wanted to. Today, women are the majority population in postsecondary education. (p. 74)

In general, Compton et al. (2006) noted, “the majority of adult students are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce, widowhood, or career change” (p. 74), while others “find they no longer have the necessary skills to become gainfully employed” (p. 74).

In a study (Kendall & Pogue, 2006) of alumni from distance degree baccalaureate programs, 80% of whom were female, participants reported the following among the distance degree program (DDP) alumni:

- “20% received a promotion or increase in pay with their current employer” (p. 161).
- “18% received a promotion or increase in pay with a different employer after earning their degree” (pp. 161-162).
- “their monthly pay increased, on the average, by 39%” (p. 162).
- “over 90% . . . would definitely or probably earn their degree through a distance program if they did it over again” (p. 163).

- “nearly two-fifths . . . reported that their salaries increased after they earned their degrees” (p. 163).
- “the distance education format was very important because it enabled them to fit courses into their schedules; maintain their commitments to their families, communities and jobs; and increase their career options and mobility” (p. 163).

Jarrell and Stanley (2004), investigating women’s return on educational investment, reported that “clearly, women experience significant discrimination in pay. Almost all studies confirm this. Yet, there remains great variability among the estimates of gender discrimination”, and “the research base still finds a significant gender wage inequality” (p. 828). It remains that women seeking employment as tenure-track faculty may not fare as well as men, according to results of a study by Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, and Rankin (2007) at a four-year public Research I university between 1990 and 1999; during the ten years of the study, women made up 37% of new hires, compared to 63% that were men.

Maume (2004) conducted a longitudinal analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) which “was available for more than 7,000 households containing more than 26,000 individuals” (p. 255), and key findings of the study indicated:

- Educational attainment is less of a determinant for advancement of women than are hours worked, general work experience, and employer tenure.
- Employers stereotype women as unstable workers and believe that promoting them to management is riskier than promoting men.

- In order for women to earn a promotion, they “have to maintain a continuous presence in the labor force, work long hours, and establish a long record of service to their employers” (p. 260).
- Children significantly impede attainment among White women, but surprisingly, that was not found to be the case among Black women.

Results of the study also indicated that “powerful White men prefer to promote managerial candidates who are socially similar to them” (Maume, 2004, p. 168).

Whitmarsh, Brown, Cooper, Hawkins-Rodgers, and Wentworth (2007) conducted a study of women regarding their career paths, the factors that affected their career choices, and influences on their careers. They categorized the career/family patterns of the women in three ways: 1) unitrack – women with no children who were in a career; 2) sequential – women who left an initial career to focus on children prior to reentry to a career, and 3) multitrack – women juggling full-time employment with motherhood after taking a brief maternity leave and then reentering the career path. Noticeably, they found differences in career obstacles among women who were in female-dominated careers as compared to those in gender-neutral careers:

Women in female-dominated careers did not cite any notable obstacles in their career paths. In striking contrast, the women in gender-neutral careers reported frequent and surprising barriers. . . . These women indicated that they were not given the skills early in their careers to effectively manage workplace issues such as negotiating a promotion or dealing with sexual harassment (p. 231). Women often adjust career aspirations to provide a compatible match with marriage and

family responsibilities. In the present study, women in gender-neutral careers made personal compromises more frequently than did the women in female-dominated careers. (p. 231)

Whitmarsh et al. (2007) also reported that women in female-dominated careers may have been influenced by “mothers and other female relatives” (p. 232), while women in gender-neutral careers postponed career decisions and gained insights from “interactions with college classmates, professors, mentors, and bosses” (p. 232). Quimby and DeSantis (2006) found that role models had a significant influence on the choices of 368 female undergraduates, and they recommended utilizing the Internet “as another way to connect women to inspirational career role models” (p. 304). Ulloa and Herrera (2006) encouraged mentoring relationships with an ethnic minority focus because “the number of minority students entering graduate school has remained disproportionately small” (p. 361).

Smulyan (2004) found in a ten-year study of 28 women graduates of a liberal arts college that after being in their careers for four or five years, the women voiced concerns about work and family conflict. Smulyan noted:

We hear some of these women caught, unable, in a sense, to construct a coherent self that allows them to be both professional and a mother. . . . College influenced their way of constructing a sense of self . . . it gave them a language and an analytic perspective to envision and accept a non-unitary self, one that has multiple roles, values, interactions and positions in the world. (pp. 236-237)

And, ten years into the study, rather than “settling down” into a specified role, the researcher (Smulyan, 2004) found, instead, that the participants were “women in transition, still in the process of defining themselves as they recognized both the fluidity of that endeavor and the limitations of their efforts. . . . The career structures and discourses available to them create an almost unbreachable gap between these two aspects of self” (p. 242).

Mullen, Goyette, and Soares (2003) examined data from the Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study – a nationally representative sample of 10,080 students from the 1.1 million who completed bachelor’s degrees in 1992-93. According to Mullen et al., findings from the study indicated there is a strong link between the parents’ level of education on that of their children’s entry into first-professional and doctoral programs. For example, Mullen et al. found, “The effects of parents’ education on enrollment in a first-professional program are substantial, increasing one’s odds by sixteen percent per year of education” (p. 150), and “every year increase in parent’s education increases one’s odds of enrolling in a doctoral program by over 20%” (p. 150). Mullen et al. also found that “undergraduate academic performance is a significant determinant of postgraduate enrollment independent of parents’ educational background” (p. 161).

Mihelich and Storrs (2003) illustrated the role of resistance among a group of female college students who identified as members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). This study examined the LDS construction of hegemony and found the women in the study employed an ideology of resistance that allowed them to “postpone marriage and childbearing to pursue higher education” (Mihelich & Storrs,

2003, p. 418), primarily by learning to “apply pressure on the Church from within (p. 419). Mihelich and Storrs noted, “The option for education is . . . the road less traveled, on the periphery of the ideals of womanhood, and places the pursuer somewhat on the fringes of LDS womanhood, as women pushing the boundaries” (p. 419).

Kingston, Hubbard, Lapp, Schroeder, and Wilson (2003) also assessed social outcomes associated with educational attainment. Focusing on commitments to civil liberties, attitudes toward gender equality, endowments of social capital, participation in elite culture, and civic knowledge, the researchers found:

Education often significantly shapes the texture of our social lives for reasons other than that the more educated have greater cognitive ability and enjoy socially advantaged lives. . . . Education often matters for multiple reasons – and sometimes for reasons we cannot explain. . . . What is needed are details about individuals’ experiences . . . and analyses of the consequences of these experiences for a variety of intellectual and affecting outcomes (e.g., speaking ability or self-confidence). (p. 68)

Literature relating to personal development and transformational outcomes of women earning an online degree is further explored and discussed in the remainder of this chapter under the following topic headings:

- Barriers Women Face in Seeking Education
- Migration of Women toward Online Education
- Motivation to Succeed
- Personal Development

- Transformation through Learning
- Expectation of What Educational Attainment Will Provide

Barriers Women Face in Seeking Education

Women in distance education are typically over the age of 25, working, with a family, and they may be prevented from traveling to a university due to:

- scheduling conflicts,
- job responsibilities,
- inadequate childcare,
- lack of reliable transportation,
- lack of appropriate housing,
- health and physical limitations,
- incarceration,
- financial burdens, and
- geographic location.

(Kramarae, 2001)

Women may also face fear of failure, a lack of self-confidence regarding their ability to succeed in educational settings, and resistance from spouse or other family members to their pursuit of higher education. There may be restricted access to the home computer or a sense of guilt when using the home computer (Burke, 2001). Kramarae (2001), author of *The Third Shift*, a study published by the American Association of University Women, found that “women are the primary users of online education,” (p. 5) and they

often face “significant barriers not usually experienced by men” (p. 5) when they return to college classes.

Geographic location may prevent women from having adequate access to the Internet; women in the south are less likely to have access to the Internet, for example, than women in New England or the Pacific Northwest (Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). The Pew Internet and American Life Report of Internet Use by Region in the United States (Spooner, Meredith & Rainie, 2003) documented Internet use was highest in the New England states, with 66% of the residents having Internet access, and in the Pacific Northwest, with 68% of these residents having web access. By contrast, in the Border States (Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) 60% of the residents had web access compared to those in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and West Virginia) where only 48% of the residents had web access, the lowest Internet utilization in the country. Internet users in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, are 52% female and “tend to have less education and lower household incomes than the national average” (p. 62). Approximately 31% of Internet users in the border states of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, “possess college diplomas or other advanced degrees. This is about five percentage points less than the national average of 36%” (Spooner et al., 2003, p. 63).

Bell, Reddy, and Rainie (2004) found, “The majority of rural users-80%, or about eighteen million people-use a dial-up connection, the country road of the Web” (p. 13). The Pew Research Center conducted a study (Horrigan & Murray, 2006) of rural broadband internet use, and the results of the study indicated:

Rural Americans lag the rest of the nation when it comes to use of high-speed internet connections at home, as well as basic measure of online penetration. . . . By the end of 2005, 24% of rural Americans had high-speed internet connections at home compared with 39% of adult Americans living elsewhere. . . . For overall internet use – by whatever connection from any location – the penetration rate for adult rural Americans lagged the rest of the country by eight percentage points at the end of 2005 (a 62% to 70% margin). This is about half the gap that existed at the end of 2003. (p. 1)

Furthermore, 27% of the respondents with dial-up service in their homes indicated broadband service was unavailable to them. Rural Americans may also find education less accessible. They are, “on average, less educated than urban and suburban Americans; 29% of non-rural Americans have college (or higher) degrees compared to 18% of rural Americans” (Horrigan & Murray, 2006, p. 9).

In a study of 40 adult women enrolled in distance education programs, Furst-Bowe and Dittman (2001) found that barriers women face in completing their education may also be internal, including “fear of failure or a lack of self-confidence regarding their ability to succeed in educational settings” (p. 405). Lunneborg (1994) studied fourteen women who overcame myriad barriers to complete their education through the Open University (OU) of England. Her book, *OU Women: Undoing Educational Obstacles*, described how the Open University, established in 1969 to provide access to education through distance-teaching methods, admitted 24,000 undergraduates in 1971 and by 1994 was serving 125,000 students, almost half of which were women holding

down jobs while going to school. During an interview with Lunneborg, one 36-year-old woman spoke of her degree from OU, “It changes you, doing it. It wakes you up. I was at home, not doing much, not exercising my brain, and then I started having confidence in myself” (p. 131). A 29-year-old woman indicated, “My biggest achievement was overcoming my *own* attitudes and expectations of life. My biggest obstacles were entirely within myself” (Lunneborg, 1994, p. 54). Davis (1991) noted, “Women, more than men suffer from low academic self-confidence, especially after being at home with children” (p. 4).

Yet another barrier may be a woman’s spouse (Cheng, 2002). Citing research by a New York group that works for the advancement of women in business, Cheng (2002) noted:

Husbands still believe that their careers are more important than the careers of their spouses. That’s just one of the challenges women continue to face, along with workplace discrimination, a chronic shortage of mentors, and greater responsibility than men for personal and familial obligations. (p. 1)

Lunneborg (1994) suggested, “Women’s intelligence has sometimes also been put down by the men in their families” (p. 61). von Prummer (2004), through years of researching German women in distance learning, found that domestic chores in the home actually increase for women when they pursue an education, and husbands actually participate less with household chores and childcare. Burke (2001), in a survey of 150 women, also found there may be restricted access to the home computer or a sense of guilt for the woman when she finally gains access to the home computer. Many of the participants in

the study reported a perception of the computer “as a family resource and their needs for study use were not a priority” (Burke, 2001, p. 611). In addition, “of those women who reported feelings of guilt or restricted access (25%), by far the majority (83%) were living with children ranging from single infants through to four or five older children or teenagers” (Burke, 2001, p. 612).

In addition to what women face at home, Dooley, Lindner, and Dooley (2005) reported in their book, *Advanced Methods in Distance Education*, findings related to gender in distance education:

Gender has been identified as a factor that may affect learning, engagement, and self-directedness of distance education learners. In a study that compared female to male students’ progress through an asynchronously delivered course, Lindner, Dooley, and Hynes (2003) found that engagement was related to gender. In this study, it was reported that females tended to engage in the course sooner and complete the course sooner than did males in the course. A basis for this finding was not determined. These authors noted that although females and males engaged differently in the course, learning outcomes did not differ. Kirkup and von Prummer (1990) noted that in distance education courses, female students interacted more with the instructor and other students than did male students. Kirkup and von Prummer (1990) and Lindner, Dooley, and Hynes (2003) recommended that instructors take into account these differences when developing and delivering distance education courses. (p. 78)

Available research indicates that women engaging in online learning place greater emphasis on personal networking and discussion than do their male counterparts (Bostock & Lizhi , 2005; Dooley et al., 2005; Graddy, 2006; Halio, 2004; Kramarae, 2001; Rovai & Baker, 2005). According to Kramarae (2001), “Men want to connect on a more abstract, solution-based level, while women have more diverse interests (including family, career, philosophy) and want to discuss more and work together” (p. 44). However, “more data are needed” (Halio, 2004, p. 60). In teaching and evaluating learning outcomes in her online course, Halio (2004) found “significant differences between male and female students and their approaches to handling the challenges of the course” (p. 60). Halio continued:

Should we change the design of online courses to help women find the networks they may need? Miller (2001) and others report that distance courses require a great deal from students. To succeed, students need to be able to project and feel confidence in an alien environment. This challenge may be especially intense for women. (p. 60)

Halio (2004) further noted:

It is interesting to note that men and women often seem to replicate the sexist behaviors in our real-time classrooms. For example, in the collaborative assignment, although each team had at least one male, women became the “secretaries,” proofreading, editing, and submitting the completed files. (Notes section, number 3)

Blumenstyk (1997) pointed out, “There are ways that women can be shut down online. It’s all according to what questions you ask” (p. 1). However, she added, “women who are drawn to distance education tend to be older and more mature, and if they’re intimidated, ‘they can get over it in a couple of minutes’” (p. 3). Barrett and Lally (1999) explored gender differences in the way a small group of postgraduate distance learners interacted online and found that women sent more messages but may also have engaged in self-censorship more often than the male participants since “messages sent by male students were, on average, more than twice as long” (p. 53). Nevertheless, Sullivan (2002) studied 125 female college students who had completed at least one online, college-level class and discovered that 42% of the positive responses associated with online learning - the most significant pattern in the data related to positive comments – were about “anonymity provided to students working in a networked learning environment” (p. 138). Some female students preferred the anonymity of the online environment, noting it “brings out the openness and honesty that a classroom setting does not give” (p. 138). Sullivan quoted one student as saying, “It’s easier to be yourself if you’re invisible” (p. 139).

Migration of Women toward Online Education

Despite barriers, many women are fulfilling their educational goals by earning online degrees. Online learning has grown in popularity among women as a means to fulfill educational goals, achieve desired outcomes, and defy barriers that traditionally prevented them from earning a degree (Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001; Kramarae, 2001;

von Prummer, 2004). Carnevale (2002) reported on a study of distance education which found “that older women with families and jobs were more drawn to undergraduate distance education programs during the 1999-2000 academic year than were members of other groups” (p. 1). In responses from over 1,000 public institutions, the Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2005) reported overall enrollment in online courses rose from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004. The Third Report to Congress on the Distance Education Demonstration Program (U.S. Department of Education, 2005) indicated the majority of institutions (16 of the 25) in the demonstration program “enrolled more women than men during 2002-03” (p. 9).

The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Report (2004) indicated at the undergraduate level “females (9%) were more likely than males (7%) to take distance education courses” (p. 12). Currently, 56% of the 200,000 students enrolled in the University of Phoenix are women, and 40% are minority students (Selingo, 2005, p. 2). Women are, indeed, turning in greater numbers to higher education to reach their educational goals and achieve desired outcomes (Kramarae, 2001); therefore, higher education is challenged to become the vehicle by which women may fulfill their expectations. Referring to information and communications technology as a means for women to connect to universities, access education, and capitalize on information and knowledge, Rajasingham (2006) said, “Women must therefore learn the skills of using this technology so that they can participate successfully in the knowledge economy” (p. 36). The National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Report (2004) also noted that

the growing need for knowledge workers is related to the increased demand for education via the Internet:

Because knowledge-based economies require increasing levels of education and training, augmenting access to postsecondary education is an issue of significant importance to the nation. In the United States, estimates of the proportion of future jobs requiring postsecondary education range from 70% to 90% (Gladieux & Swail, 1999). Even though U.S. enrollments in postsecondary education are at record levels, virtually every state recognizes the need to expand access and increase enrollment in education and training programs after high school. (p. 1)

Kramarae (2001) emphasized, “Universities in the United States are undergoing dramatic changes as they respond to a competitive global economy, stunning new technological opportunities, and the increased need for and interest in continuing education courses and programs” (p. 3). Kramarae (2001) also noted computer technology has “transformed the delivery of education, the development and dissemination of knowledge, and communications between scholars and students” (p. 3). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Waits & Lewis, 2003), in the twelve-month period of the 2000-2001 academic year, 56% of all two-year and four-year institutions offered distance education courses with an estimated combined enrollment of 3,077,000. In 2005, online courses accounted for 2.4 million enrollments, up from two million in 2003 (Simonson, 2006a). Meyen and Lian (1997) also noted “online instruction offers access and flexibility” (p. 167), which is a factor for women who must balance various roles and responsibilities while earning an education.

Motivation to Succeed

The pursuit of an online degree and the motivation to complete the degree were examined from the perspective of cognitive learning theories. Self-determination theory purports the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy as motivators for goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The desire for competence, relatedness and autonomy may support the pursuit of professional advancement. Many women are motivated to improve their wages since “approximately sixteen million U.S. women, or 39%, earned low wages in 1998, and low-wage female workers tend to be disproportionately young, less educated, and single” (Bierema, 2001, p. 54). Barriers in the workplace are still evident. “Women make up [more than] half the human race and over half the U.S. workforce” (Bierema, 2001, p. 53), yet they still trail men in pay, promotion, benefits, and other economic rewards (Bowler, 1999; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Knoke & Ishio, 1998).

Maume (2004) summarized effects of artificial barriers, or a glass ceiling, on women and minorities:

The effect of educational attainment on managerial status is insignificant for White women, but is significant for White men and Blacks....That is, hours worked, general work experience, and employer tenure have strong positive effects on White women’s chances of being a manager; the effects of these variables are also significant for Black women. These results are consistent with arguments suggesting that employers stereotype women as unstable workers and believe that promoting them to management is riskier than promoting men (England, 1992; Kanter, 1977; Reskin & Padavic, 2001). . . . For women to

obtain high rewards in the market place, they have to maintain a continuous presence in the labor force, work long hours, and establish a long record of service to their employers. . . . The presence of children increased employer perceptions that women were unstable workers. Thus, it is noteworthy that the effect of children significantly impedes attainment among White women. (p. 260)

Other women are motivated to fulfill their educational goals by a sense of mission or a disorienting dilemma in their lives that leads to intense self-examination (Kroth & Boverie, 2000) and critical assessment of knowledge belief systems, power, social relationships, and presuppositions (Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Therefore, women may seek an online degree to satisfy an innate psychological need to reach a goal previously set for themselves as part of their life mission. Motivating factors prompt adults to acquire additional education (Duning et al., 1993). Dooley et al. (2005) suggested motivation dimensions in instructional theory are typified “when a learner is engaged in the instruction because he or she is interested, finds the material to be relevant, expects to apply the information, and finds it satisfying” (p. 287). von Prummer (2000) studied the impact of distance education on German women from working-class backgrounds and found many were “employed in dead-end, boring jobs which provided a basic income and . . . security, but did not offer career prospects of intellectual challenges” (p. 205). Furthermore, she added, “In choosing to study for a degree at a distance these women could pursue a dream of upward occupational and

social mobility and of personal development which would not have been possible in any other university setting” (p. 205).

Personal Development

Personal development is one outcome of earning an online degree. Development is meant to “expand the capabilities of people, to increase their ability to lead long and healthy lives, to enable them to cultivate their talents and interests, and to afford them an opportunity to live in dignity and with self-respect” (Moghadam, 1994, p. 860). The expansion and utilization of educational opportunities for and by women are within the purview of human resource development, “a process of developing and/or unleashing human expertise” (Swanson, 1995, p. 208), and are bound by an emergent world view: “How an entity *becomes* constitutes *what* the actual entity *is*, so the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its being is constituted by its becoming” (Lee, 2001, p. 330).

Human Resource Development borrows from several disciplines (Weinberger, 1998) and is supported by several underlying theories, including: “learning: adult learning – organizational learning – learning organizations; performance improvement; systems theory; economic theory; and psychological theory – with the emphasis on learning” (Weinberger, 1998, p. 80). This study was informed by psychological theory, particularly transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 2000). “In the constellation of psychological theories relevant to HRD, it is cognitive psychology that exclusively focuses on the internal processes of individuals” (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 103). A

significant development in The Human Resources School of Thought (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean, 1995) has been that of “humanism, the key values of which include a firm belief in human rationality, human perfectibility through learning, and the importance of self-awareness” (Rothwell et al., 1995, p. 17). Advocates of the Human Resources School articulated their beliefs in many disciplines: “In psychology, Carl Rogers (1942) and Abraham Maslow (1943, 1954) championed a new view of people and change. Roger’s central assumption was that people have a lasting desire to improve themselves and satisfy their needs” (Rothwell et al., 1995, p. 18). Human resource development has been shaped by early research of education and the learning process:

In education, Cyril Houle (1961) and Malcolm Knowles (1972) focused new attention on assumptions about the learning process and the learners themselves.

Houle researched why people learn and found three primary reasons:

1. The love of learning itself;
2. The desire for social relationships, and
3. The desire for practical information to use in solving immediate problems.

(Rothwell et al., 1995, p. 18)

von Prummer (2000) suggested German women engaged in distance education because they wanted to move out of dead-end jobs and pursue their dreams. Furthermore, von Prummer (2000) cited evidence to suggest the women were motivated to change their status:

Conducting an earlier small-scale interview study of three randomly chosen women graduates, Irene Raehlmann (1984) found that all three women happened to be of working-class origin. Her analysis of the in-depth interviews led her to conclude that all had been highly motivated to break out of their “inherited” class position and on the basis of their studying and gaining their M.A. had brought about changes in their personal and professional lives. (p. 205)

Mickelson (2003) posited:

While women may perceive the weaker link between their education and traditional returns to it from the opportunity structure, it is also likely that they evaluate returns to their education differently from men. . . . Women are more likely than are men to evaluate returns to education in terms not only of the income, status, and careers it brings, but of their education’s potential to enhance the quality of their personal, familial, and community lives. (p. 375)

Transformation through Learning

“Rather than a change in what we know, transformation is a change in the way we know” (Kegan, 2000, p. 49); “it is a dramatic shift in the foundation upon which we judge, make decisions, and act” (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002, p. 124). Baumgartner (2001) noted, “Visions of caterpillars emerging as butterflies and deathbed conversions are popular images of transformation” (p. 16). Clark (1993b) defined transformational learning as follows:

Transformation is about change, so transformational learning must be related to learning that produces change. But does not all learning result in change of some kind, whether of attitudes, skills, knowledge, or beliefs? What is different about the changes that transformational learning generates? The immediate answer is that transformational learning produces more far-reaching changes in the learners than does learning in general, and that these changes have a significant impact on the learner's subsequent experiences. (p. 47)

Kilgore and Bloom (2002) described the role of experience in transformational learning:

We shape each experience with our meaning perspectives. Most experiences either reinforce our theories of how the world is or gently stretch their limits. Transformational learning theory holds that when an experience is exceptionally unlike one's expectations from the standpoint of one's meaning perspective, the experience is either rejected, or through critical reflection the meaning perspective is transformed to accommodate the experience. (p. 124)

Baumgartner (2001) described various lenses of transformational learning theory:

Believing that education was for the purpose of liberation, Freire had students discuss and reflect on relevant life issues such as the inadequate pay they received as rural workers. Through this process, workers recognized the larger societal structures that oppressed them, and how they could overcome these barriers. Through consciousness-raising, or "conscientization," learners came to see the world and their place in it differently. Empowered in their new perspective, they could act to transform their world. (p. 16)

In short, “learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or a revised interpretation of the meaning of one’s experience in order to guide future action” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

Such “experiences that have the potential to transform one’s meaning perspective are referred to as disorienting dilemmas” (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002, p. 124). Palloff and Pratt (1999) explained Mezirow’s description of the disorienting dilemma as follows:

Perspectives are transformed when learners encounter what he terms *disorienting dilemmas* – dilemmas that cause the learners to critically assess distortions in the areas of the nature and use of knowledge belief systems related to power and social relationships, and *psychic distortions* – or presuppositions that cause anxiety and inaction. (pp. 130-131)

Taylor (1997) described the disorienting dilemma as “an acute internal/external personal crisis” (p. 4), the catalyst which sets in motion the reflection and self-examination leading to transformation. However, Clark (1993a) found an additional trigger to transformative learning that she characterized as an “integrating circumstance” (p. 81) that initiates a perspective transformation.

In contrast to the abrupt and dramatic appearance of the disorienting dilemma, the integrating circumstance occurs after and seems to be the culmination of an earlier stage of exploration and searching which prepares the person for the learning to follow. This is an indefinite period in which the person consciously or unconsciously searches for something which is missing in their life; when they

find the “missing piece,” the transformational learning process is catalyzed. (Clark, 1993a, p. 81)

Palloff and Pratt (1999) described the potential for transformation among online learners as follows:

Transformative learning is, to many participants, an unanticipated result of the online learning process. If students were informed in advance that a process of transformation would be the outcome of their participation in an academic course, is it likely that they would enroll? Intellectual growth is anticipated, but personal growth is not necessarily a reason students engage in a process of online learning. (p. 130)

Women earning an online degree often describe themselves as changed, a different person (Heron, 1997; von Prummer, 2000). “Transformational learning *shapes* people; they are different afterward, in both ways they and others can recognize” (Clark, 1993b, p. 47). Mezirow (1996) explained that action is an essential component of transformative learning:

Taking action on reflective insights often involves situational, emotional, and informational constraints that may also require new learning experiences. A transformative learning experience requires that the learner makes an informed and reflective *decision* to act. This decision may result in immediate action, delayed action caused by situational constraints or lack of information on how to act, or result in a reasoned reaffirmation of an existing pattern of action. (pp. 163-164)

Transformation also requires reflection. “Reflection, a ‘turning back’ on experience, can mean many things: simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one’s habits of doing things” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185). Furthermore, Mezirow (1998) underscored the role of critical reflection of assumptions (CRA):

When the object of critical reflection is an assumption or presupposition, there is major potential for effecting a change in one’s established frame of reference. Assumptions upon which these habits of mind and related points of view are predicated may be epistemological, logical, ethical, psychological, ideological, social, cultural, economic, political, ecological, scientific, spiritual, or pertain to other aspects of experience. (p. 186)

In addition, Mezirow (1998) added:

Transformation Theory maintains that human learning is grounded in the nature of human communication; to understand the meaning of what is being communicated – especially when intentions, values, moral issues, and feelings are involved – requires critical reflection of assumptions. (p. 3)

Baumgartner (2001) described transformation as a phase in which people “reevaluate the assumptions they have made about themselves and their world” (p. 17). Taylor (1997) reported findings from multiple studies indicating critical reflection “can only begin once emotions have been validated and worked through” (p. 6). Mezirow (1998) noted situations in which transformative learning may occur without critical reflection of assumptions:

Taylor (1994) challenges the idea that transformative learning necessarily requires critical reflection of assumptions. . . . Taylor contends that the development of new habits of thought and living in different cultures can produce a transformation in frame of reference without the person being aware of it. . . . In a sense, this assimilative learning, albeit mindless, did indeed result in major reorientation and changes in values. (p. 191)

Yet, Mezirow (1998) argued that it is critical reflection of assumptions that provides the emancipatory dimension of adult learning, “the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of reference, paradigms, or cultural canons (frames of reference held in common) that limit or distort communication and understanding” (pp. 191-192). Cranton and Roy (2003) noted that “emancipatory knowledge is gained through a process of critically questioning ourselves and the social systems within which we live” (p. 89).

In addition to critical reflection, transformative learning emphasizes the importance of relationships. “People engage in ‘reflective discourse’ (Mezirow, 2000, p. 11). In short, they talk with others about their new perspective to obtain consensual validation” (Baumgartner, 2001, p. 17). Taylor (1997) explained the role of relationships in the transformation process:

Transformative learning is not about promoting and striving for individual autonomy, but about building connections and community. It is through relationships that learners develop the necessary openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, which is essential for managing the

threatening and emotionally charged nature of a transformative learning experience. (p. 9)

Merriam and Caffarella (1999) described the remaining steps in the transformation process as *recognizing that others have gone through a similar process, exploring options*, and formulating a *plan of action*. Clark and Wilson (1991) suggested learning may not be separated from the experiences of the learner, and gender is a significant social construct underlying social relationships and power structures. They described the need for a gendered analysis of women's learning:

A gendered analysis recognizes that women and men live within a social and cultural context which is both defined and dominated by men at the expense of women. This context of patriarchy impacts women and men differently because of their unequal status; further, the subordinate status of women means that their experience differs qualitatively from the experience of men. (p. 77)

Further, Clark and Wilson (1991) also emphasized the importance of acknowledging subordinate status when analyzing perspective changes among women. They added:

A study of transformational learning in women within the context of patriarchal culture would mean understanding their experience in relation to their subordinate status, assessing the impact of this on their learning, and discerning the links between changes in their personal perspectives and the growing empowerment of women within an inequitable social structure. (p. 77-78)

Finally, Kroth and Boverie (2000) suggested an alternative to the disorienting dilemma in the process of transformation is that of a sense of "unconscious knowing" (p. 136),

life mission or purpose which directs “learning choices and motivation to learn” (p. 140) and “seems to orient that person’s actions whether he or she is aware of it” (p. 140).

Kroth and Boverie (2000) posited:

The stronger and more focused a person’s life mission, the stronger and more focused the learner’s self-direction; a person’s mission provides a source of meaning to learning activities. Life mission directs both the level of motivation to learn and the learning choices that the individual makes. (p. 147)

Sources of life mission may be rooted in the spiritual, vocational, or social realms and prompt the question, “Why am I?” (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, p. 135) and require self-examination in context of the individual sense of mission:

The question “Why?” is the essence of Mezirow’s (1978) disorienting dilemma and Jarvis’s (1983, 1993) disjuncture because it requires individuals to unfreeze their meaning perspectives, tacit assumptions, and belief systems, and to look at the meaning of their own existence. Most people struggle to understand these larger questions of existence, purpose and reasons for being throughout their lifetime (Jarvis, 1983, 1993). (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, p. 136)

Actions taken by the individual are directed by this mission, whether he or she is aware of it. “Learning choices and the motivation to learn are directed by this mission even if it is hidden” (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, p. 140). Yet, the sense of life mission may be irrevocably changed when views or beliefs supporting the mission are brought under scrutiny in a broader context (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, p. 145). Educators should provide students opportunities to examine their views of life mission:

Generally, educators can improve the learning process by recognizing that learners come with a set of assumptions about their life purposes about which they very likely are not even aware. Adult educators can improve the learning process for adults by facilitating the examination of life mission itself and its associated assumptions. . . . At a minimum, educators can improve the learning process for adults by providing the means for them to understand how their life mission relates to the learning topic. . . . This linkage would increase learner self-direction, helping the learner to make meaningful learning choices and maximizing motivation. (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, p. 146)

However, as adult educators encourage critical reflection of assumptions and examination of life mission to promote emancipation of the learner, they should also engage in self examination:

It is difficult to promote deep internal passion in others when one's own lifework is a hollow shell. The slick veneer of empty enthusiasm for one's profession or the material being taught is usually transparent to learners. If educators cannot make the personal connection between what they are teaching and what they passionately view as a lifework, then students will find it more difficult to seek their own. Educators must examine their own reasons for teaching and strike out the weary reasons, the imposed reasons, and the reasons that are so far afield from real sources of passion that the connection is illusory. Having struck those out, each educator must see what remains. If there is an opportunity to find deeper sources of passion then the educator must seek her own fountainhead and

“drink from the waters there” (Brookfield, 1990, p. 28). If the educator cannot find her own connections, she must look until she finds her own lifework. The words of Dewey (1916, 1938), Lindeman (1926), Freire (1970, 1993), and Mezirow (1978, 1990, 1991, 1994, 1996) convey a spirit of commitment to causes, philosophies, and actions. The adult educator who wishes to facilitate real learner growth would do well to aspire to a lifework of like devotion. (Kroth & Boverie, 2000, pp. 146-147)

Merriam (2004) maintained that transformational learning alters one’s existing frame of reference:

In transformational learning, one’s values, beliefs, and assumptions compose the lens through which personal experience is mediated and made sense of. When this meaning system is found to be inadequate in accommodating some life experience, through transformational learning, it can be replaced with a new perspective. (p. 61)

Expectation of What Educational Attainment Will Provide

Women currently, and will in the future, enter distance education and achieve their educational and professional goals in spite of the existing challenges and barriers (Kramarae, 2001). However, there is little research to document whether the outcome of earning an online degree is equal to the preliminary level of *expectancy* – the belief that applying effort to a task will result in its successful accomplishment; *instrumentality* – the perceived connection between task performance and possible outcomes; and *valence*

– the value the person places on a particular outcome (Desimone et al., 2002, p. 50). Regarding actual versus expected outcomes of German women earning a distance education degree, von Prummer (2000) noted, “As far as these women are concerned, I have no way of knowing how their plans progressed and whether their hopes were eventually realized” (p. 205). Kramarae (2001) noted that education is changing, particularly for women:

Those who argue that higher education has remained basically the same for many centuries ignore what, for women, has been a revolutionary change during the last century and a half: The admission of women into colleges and universities has evolved from a statistical rarity to women slightly outnumbering men overall in undergraduate programs. (p. 4)

Despite a history of inequality in education, women are the majority of enrollees in higher education, which may be an indication women view education as not only attainable but valuable for its particular potential to lead to desired outcomes. Evidence of this expectation is strongly indicated in higher education enrollment figures. Stalker and Prentice (1998) noted that even though women comprised the majority of all undergraduate students (56.1%), they were only awarded one-third (35.4%) of the doctorates. However, by 2004, women comprised 45.3% of all doctorate recipients (The Nation, 2006). Currently, 4,216 institutions of higher education enroll over seventeen million students, more than half of whom (57.2%) are women (The Nation, 2006). Historically, women were excluded from higher education in America because the colonial point of view held women as incapable of reason and intellectual thought

(Langdon & Giovengo, 2003). Rudolph (1962), in “The American College and University: A History,” provided more detail concerning the limitations ascribed to women in this era:

The colonial view of woman was simply that she was intellectually inferior – incapable, merely by reason of being a woman, of great thoughts. Her faculties were not worth training. Her place was in the home, where man had assigned her a number of useful functions. (pp. 307–308)

“In fact, this viewpoint persevered, and women would be denied higher education for almost two centuries” (Langdon & Giovengo, 2003, p. 8). The first women’s colleges founded in the late 1800s “provided an advanced education to many women, and a true higher education to a few. . . . Women’s colleges, however, were imbued with the traditional view that women were equal but different from men” (Stock, 1978, p. 193). In addition, “women’s focus on being attractive to men decreased their academic focus and deflated their educational aspirations” (Langdon & Giovengo, 2003, p. 11). The collegiate education of women has also been slowed by its association with other historical events and social issues:

In religion it has been associated with various heretical movements, in social history with different types of abolition, and in politics with claims for suffrage. In most cases, the other issue was resolved, and feminine education was postponed *sine die*. One can only conclude that the idea of educating women disturbed the accepted wisdom of succeeding epochs more profoundly than is readily apparent. (Park, 1978, p. 3)

Blumberg (1989), in an international study of women, found that educating women contributes to the “wealth and well-being of their nations as well as their families,” (Blumberg, 1989, p. 95). She summarized that “educating girls brings benefits to both the females and the larger society” (p. 94). Women contribute “first through productive activities” that benefit various sectors of the economy (Moghadam, 1994), and “second, through women’s education, which can lead to lower fertility, better family health, reduced infant and child mortality, higher participation in the labor force, and greater economic growth” (p. 860).

Both in the past and in modern times, women have also experienced loss of advancement in the workplace. Evidence of unequal treatment of women in the workplace remains:

Women make up half the human race and over half the U.S. workforce. Despite fifty years of exponential gains in workplace representation, women trail men in pay, promotion, benefits, and other economic rewards (Bowler, 1999; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Knoke & Ishio, 1998). I contend that women’s learning at work is challenging because it happens in a context that has been largely created, maintained, and controlled by white men. (Bierema, 2001, p. 53)

Bierema (2001) also cited various reasons women face greater instability in the workplace:

Women receive less pay and experience greater rates of unemployment than men do world-wide. Elder and Johnson (1999) outline four reasons that women experience unemployment more often than men do. First, women are more likely

to leave and reenter the workforce for personal reasons. Second, women have a narrower range of career options than men and face tougher competition against each other in the job market. Third, women in many countries tend to lack the education and training required to secure employment. Finally, women are usually the first affected by layoffs. (p. 54)

Perhaps the history of challenges women have faced in society and in gaining education have led women to hope for and expect fewer financial rewards as a result of their education and at the peak of their careers (Mahitivanichcha, 2003).

As discovered in the literature and discussed in this chapter, there is evidence that gender differences remains a significant factor affecting the status of women in society (Clark & Wilson, 1991) as well as the career outcomes for women (Bierema, 2001). A ten-year study of hiring practices of faculty at a four-year public Research I university indicated women constituted 37% of new hires compared to 63% of new hires that were men (Marschke et al., 2007). According to Maume (2004), educational attainment is less of a determinant for advancement of women than are hours worked, general work experience, and employer tenure. Common misconceptions remain in the work place, such as the idea that women are unstable workers or that promoting women, especially those with children, is riskier than promoting men (Maume, 2004).

Influences on women's attainment were discussed in this chapter, as well. It is not unusual for women to adjust career aspirations to accommodate their personal, family, or social responsibilities (Mickelson, 2003), nor is it uncommon for a woman's career decisions to be influenced by their mothers or other women in their families,

leading to entry into a female-dominated career (Whitmarsh et al., 2007). Women who delay career decisions may be influenced by other role models such as college classmates, professors, mentors, and bosses, and the insights gained from these people often lead to entry into a gender-neutral career (Whitmarsh et al.), while undergraduate academic performance and the parents' level of education remain determinants of postgraduate enrollment (Mullen et al., 2003).

Cultural influences, such as religious affiliation, play a role in the perception some women have of their freedom, or lack of, to pursue education rather than marriage and motherhood (Mihelich & Storrs, 2003). Although there are a number of clearly identifiable and well-defined influences on women's attainment and pursuit of education, there are also other reasons women seek education that are not easily explained (Kingston et al., 2003). Additional research and analysis is needed to investigate and discover individual learning experiences and their outcomes for women.

Although women were historically excluded from higher education in the United States (Langdon & Giovengo, 2003; Rudolph, 1962), the literature in this chapter provided evidence that educating women benefits the larger society (Blumberg, 1989; Moghadam, 1994). It is still the case, however, that the imperfect control women have over births may lead them to experience uncertainty in their educational, career, and family paths (Sheran, 2007). Certainly, the norms in society have changed, as well, and the majority of women no longer have the luxury to stay in the home and be full-time mothers and housewives due to economic reasons (Compton et al., 2006); most women "are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce,

widowhood, or career change” (p. 74). In one study (Kendall & Pogue, 2006), women who earned a degree reported gains in salary. Despite a potential for increased income after earning a degree and entering a career, one researcher noted women remain conflicted about the multiple roles they must balance, often at the expense of their own sense of self, and, even ten years after graduating from college, are “in transition, still in the process of defining themselves” (Smulyan, 2004). Mezirow (2004) suggested, “The fully developed learner moves through a series of developmental forms to arrive at the highest potential for understanding – the *capacity* to engage in transformative learning” (p. 69).

The need for women to redefine themselves, and continue to develop self understanding, is leading many women back to higher education. King’s (2004) study of adults in graduate courses resulted in recommendations to increase the potential for transformative learning in adults by facilitating learning in environments that promote critical questioning, reflective learning, and discussion. There is evidence of transformative learning taking place among some adults, and examples from the research include those who come into higher education in mid-life (Kennedy, 2002) or those who have been victims of abuse or trauma (Wagner & Magnusson, 2005). Bennetts (2003) cited evidence of transformation among individuals as “self-transformation, their ability to cope with and instigate change in self and in others, transformed relationships, increased educational drive, career improvement, and better quality of life” (p. 457). According to Stromquist (2006), “the power to reflect, calculate, analyze, draw conclusions and see beyond the immediate environment has helped many women to

analyze their realities and subsequently to devise means to transform their lives” (p. 149).

Although the goals of transformational learning include authenticity, or the creation of our “genuine self in the community” (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 94), autonomy resulting from “self-emancipation through self-knowledge” (Moore, 2005, p. 401), and the ability to “overcome systematically induced distortions of perception and communication” (Moore, 2005, p. 401), the paths of transformation may be different for different learners. Some experience a crisis or experience that has the potential to cause the learner to engage in critical reflection and change his or her meaning perspective (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Others may experience an “integrating circumstance” (Clark, 1993a) whereby they search for, and find, the missing piece that shapes their lives differently and leads to an altered frame of reference, or one’s values, beliefs, and assumptions (Merriam, 2004). McWhinney and Markos (2003) suggested that transformation may be sequenced by a loss of what has been or an awareness that one can no longer turn back; entering a new place of uncertainty that leaves one open to change; or unexpected learning that leads to radical, irreversible transformation. The results, the authors noted, are four transformative paths: *productive and instrumental* – enhancement of one’s career opportunities; *personal* – evidenced by loss, change, and return; *emancipatory* – social transformation; and *holistic and ecological* – in search of spirit and engagement with the natural environment (McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Cranton and Roy (2003) categorized transformative learning as epistemic – the way we come to know things and the way we use that knowledge; sociolinguistic – the way we

view social norms, culture, and how we use language; psychological – self-concept, personality, emotional responses, and personal images and dreams; moral-ethical – conscience and morality; philosophical – religious doctrine or world view; and aesthetic – tastes and standards about beauty.

Transformative Learning Theory seeks to identify not only the settings and stages of transformation, but also “factors that shape the transformative experience and how it can be fostered in practice” (Taylor, 2007, p. 185). This study sought to identify factors supportive of a transformative learning experience among women in the online environment. These women, especially those with families and jobs, were drawn to this mode of delivery by virtue of its expanded access and flexibility (Kramarae, 2001; Meyen & Lian, 1997). According to Taylor (2007), factors in the online environment which contribute to a transformative learning experience include an emphasis on a great deal of writing, the life experiences of the participants, and the significance of having time to reflect on intellectual and emotional connections in class discussions. Transformational learning requires critical reflection (Baumgartner, 2001; Cranton & Roy, 2003; Mezirow, 1998; Taylor, 1997; Taylor, 2007) which may aid the learner in forming a new frame of reference (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1998). Validation of new perspectives (Baumgartner, 2001), making connections (Taylor, 1997), and “recognizing that other have gone through a similar process” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) constitute the process of reflective discourse that is also vital to the transformational process. Mezirow (1996) emphasized that action is an essential component of transformative

learning, whether it is immediate action, delayed action, or a reaffirmation of existing action.

There is evidence in the literature that something of a transformative convergence effect – optimization of factors which amplify transformative learning – seems to occur among some adult learners in the online environment, and this is depicted in Figure 1. This effect seems pronounced for online learners when factors known to foster transformative learning are utilized in the online environment, and the learner has reached a level of development that provides her with the capacity to engage in transformative learning. Boyer et al. (2006) noted results of a study of online graduate students indicated evidence of transformation “embedded within students’ reflective discussions; . . . fundamental changes in their established ideas, beliefs, habits, or assumptions had occurred” (p. 351). Dabbagh (2004) suggested the online course environment promoted social constructivist learning principles, articulation, and reflection that were “transformative in nature” (p. 48). According to Richardson and Newby (2006), through social practices of writing, reflection, and discourse, online students in their study experienced increased self-direction and learning that was “self-organizing and transformative in nature” (p. 48).

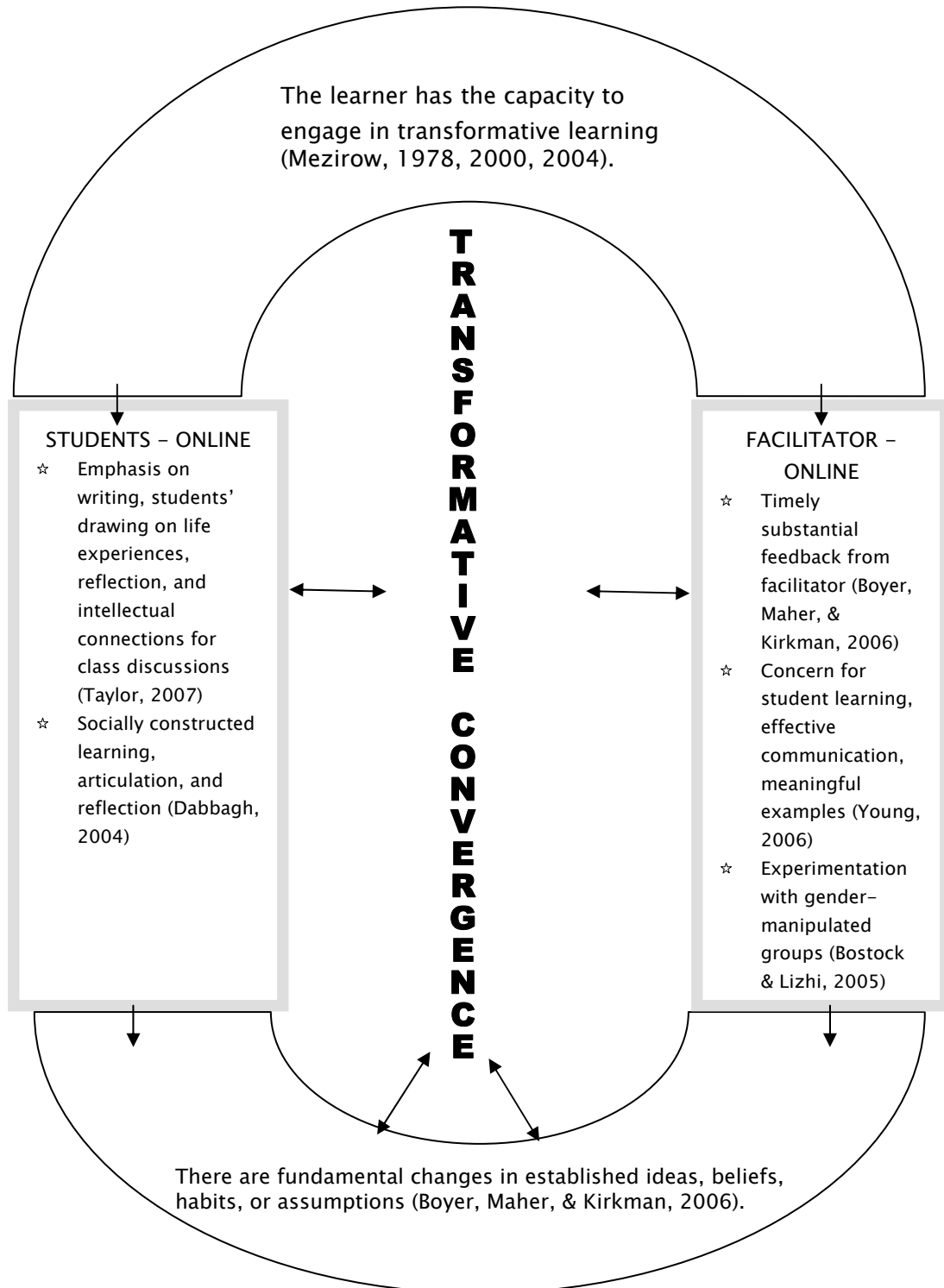


Figure 1
Transformative Convergence Factors of Online Learning

Rovai and Baker (2005) noted that women, in particular, felt more connected to other students in the online environment, and perceived they learned more than their male peers. One researcher (Graddy, 2006) found that women contributed more discussion postings than their male peers, and that in the online environment there was “no evidence of a male crowding-out effect” (p. 211). Furthermore, researchers discovered from studies of critical thinking in online environments that learners engaged in more critical thinking in smaller discussion groups as compared to the level of critical thinking in whole group discussions (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007; Wickersham & Dooley, 2006). Halio (2004) discovered that men sometimes wanted to delegate to women the secretarial duties such as proofreading, editing, and submitting work, and Bostock and Lizhi (2005) found when women were placed in online groups manipulated by gender, the all-female groups produced more messages per student than male groups. Another study (Downing & Chim, 2004) indicated that reflective students, those valuing additional time for reflection, “behave in a more extraverted and active way” (p. 273) in the online environment, which “is in stark contrast to feelings of having been...’beaten to the comment’ reported by Reflectors in the traditional mode of delivery” (p. 273).

In addition to the importance of the online environment itself, Boyer et al. (2006) found in graduate online courses “the facilitator of the course encouraged transformation in that the instructor provided timely substantial feedback to all questions, concerns, and work submissions, developed rubrics so they [students] would have accurate information and a clear picture of their work products and skills, and invited students to engage in reflection and dialogue with the instructor and fellow students” (p. 351).

There are many positive aspects of online education that are documented in research findings. Computer technology has transformed the delivery of education, the dissemination of knowledge, and communications between scholars and students (Kramarae, 2001). Enrollments in online learning have shown a steady increase (Carnevale, 2002; Kramarae, 2001; National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Report, 2004; Selingo, 2005; Simonson, 2006a). Despite these positive aspects, higher education has not positioned itself to fully embrace the phenomenon of online education, and growth in online education has often exceeded the expectations of organizational planners (Simonson, 2006a). Tallent-Runnels, et al. (2006) found that although universities and students are engaging in distance learning in increasing numbers, “few universities have written policies, guidelines, or technical support for faculty members or students” (p. 93). Other studies (Egan & Akdere, 2005; Darabi et al., 2006; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005) noted ambiguity surrounding the identification and refinement of valued competencies, roles, and instructional tasks in distance education, particularly when comparing the opinions of different constituencies (graduate student-practitioners from distance learning programs, graduate students taking online courses, or distance education instructors). Furthermore, according to Adams and DeFleur (2005), attitudes about hiring faculty who earned an online degree, whether fully online or partially online, are negative. The researchers’ quantitative and qualitative findings indicated that 109 faculty hiring committee chairs overwhelmingly chose applicants with traditional degrees over candidates who had earned a fully online degree (98% as compared to only one chair who selected the candidate with the fully online degree) or a degree earned

partially online (94% to 16%) when compared to degrees earned partially online (Adams & DeFleur, 2005). Not surprisingly, Leisure (2007) reported in her study of women in an online doctoral program there was concern among the participants that their credentials will be questioned and the degree will not be viewed as being of the same quality as one from a traditional institution.

As noted in the literature, women have traditionally faced barriers to education, which may include geographic distance, fear of failure or lack of self-confidence (Davis, 1991; Furst-Bowe & Dittman, 2001; Horrigan & Murray, 2006; Kramarae, 2001; Lunneborg, 1994; Spooner et al., 2003; Wasserman & Richmond-Abbott, 2005). In addition, the woman's spouse may negatively affect her ability to secure an education due to the husband's belief that his career is more important (Cheng, 2002), increased domestic duties (von Prummer, 2004), the husband putting down the woman's intelligence (Lunneborg, 1994), restricted access to the home computer (Burke, 2001, or difficulty accessing the home computer (Burke, 2001).

However, regardless of the barriers, females in the online environment have been shown to engage in the online course sooner and complete the course sooner than males (Dooley et al., 2005), and women place greater emphasis on social networking and discussion than their male counterparts (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005; Dooley et al., 2005; Graddy, 2006; Halio, 2004; Kramarae, 2001; Rovai & Baker, 2005). However, women in one online environment engaged in self-censorship more often than male participants (Barrett & Lally, 1999). Sullivan (2002) found that female students preferred the anonymity of the online environment.

The literature indicated women may be motivated to succeed in online education based on a need for self-determination, competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000). On the other hand, women may be trying to improve their wages, benefits, and other economic rewards which still lag behind those of men (Bierema, 2001; Bowler, 1999; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Knoke & Ishio, 1998). They may be trying to overcome a glass ceiling of artificial barriers to their advancement (Bierema, 2001; Maume, 2004), or they may choose to move out of a dead-end, boring job and into an intellectually challenging career (von Prummer, 2000). Still others may be motivated to fulfill educational goals by a sense of mission or to address a crisis that has occurred in their lives causing a disorienting dilemma, or a critical assessment of knowledge belief systems, power, social relationships, and presuppositions (Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

As women satisfy their various goals by entering online education, they may experience a degree of personal development that can serve to expand their capabilities, increase their ability to lead long and healthy lives, enable them to cultivate their talents and interests, or afford them an opportunity to live in dignity and with self-respect (Moghadam, 1994). People have a lasting desire to improve themselves and satisfy their needs (Rothwell et al., 1995); however, it is important to note that women evaluate returns to education in terms not only of income, status, and career, but also of its potential to enhance the quality of their personal, familial, and community lives (Mickelson, 2003; von Prummer, 2000).

In light of the fact that there is growing demand for distance education among women (Kramarae, 2001; Waits & Lewis, 2003), additional research is needed to determine whether the educational goals and expectations of American women who earned an online degree were realized and what changes resulted in their personal and professional lives. The outcomes experienced by some women as a result of earning an online degree may encourage other women to seek this mode of delivery as a solution to the problem of inaccessible educational choices (Lunneborg, 1994). The opportunity for women achievers to share with other women may thus lead to unanticipated and positive outcomes, just as the educational process itself may lead to unanticipated and positive outcomes in personal development and transformation.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do.
-- Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993)

This chapter focuses on the research methodology used in this study. This chapter includes the following sections: purpose of the study, selection of qualitative methodology, research design, population, procedures, data analysis, and a discussion of the rigor of the data.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the personal development, transformational outcomes, and change that occurred in the lives of women who earned an online degree. The data provided important insights into how the online environment fosters development, both professional and personal, among women who participate in online learning, as well important insights regarding factors of the online environment which contribute to transformational change in some learners.

Selection of the Qualitative Method

The researcher chose to employ qualitative methods to fully investigate the experiences of women engaged in online learning. In the study, the researcher sought to understand why participants chose an online degree program and how their lives were changed as a result of earning an online degree. The heuristic research design (Moustakas, 1990) and

heuristic self-search inquiry (HSSI) (Sela-Smith, 2002) were used to investigate the phenomenon. Derived from the Greek word *heuriskein*, the word *heuristic* means to “discover or to find” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 9), and when using this methodology, the researcher is expected to “obtain qualitative depictions that are at the heart and depths of a person’s experience” (p. 38). The researcher seeks to “discover the nature and meaning of the phenomenon itself and to illuminate it from direct first-person accounts of individuals who have directly encountered the phenomenon in experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 38).

This method of inquiry emphasizes connectedness and relationship and begins with a desire to “more fully reveal the essence or meaning of a phenomenon of human experience” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 42). The researcher is “intimately and autobiographically related to the question” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 43) and is to engage in self-reflection, self-dialogue, and introspection in the process of investigation. A necessary component of the study is that the researcher must know what is known. “Into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge” (Polanyi, 1962, p. 312). The heuristic research methodology not only positions the researcher within the study, but also requires the researcher to reflect on her personal knowledge of the phenomenon. While this is a departure from the objective, empirical method so common in scientific research, Polanyi (1962), a medical doctor and Ph.D. in chemistry who witnessed the Nazis’ perversion of scientific inquiry and logic by using an extreme positivist view, argued:

Objectivism has totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and *cannot* prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we *can* prove. (p. 286)

According to Jacobs (2000):

A key to understanding Polanyi's thought is a profound concern he had that knowledge was being dehumanized in the modern world....The constructive alternative put forward by Polanyi, pre-eminent theme encapsulated in the title of his book [*Personal Knowledge*], is that the human element – expressed in judgment, skill, discernment, passion, commitment and other *personal* factors – is the life-blood coursing through every part of scientific training, inquiry and discovery. (pp. 311-312)

Douglass and Moustakas (1985) added, “It is the focus on the human person in experience and that person's reflective search, awareness, and discovery that constitutes the essential core of heuristic investigation” (p. 42). These authors contrasted heuristic research with phenomenological research as follows:

(1) Whereas phenomenology encourages a kind of detachment from the phenomenon being investigated, heuristics emphasizes connectedness and relationship. (2) Whereas phenomenology permits the researcher to conclude with definitive descriptions of the structures of experience, heuristics leads to depiction of essential meanings and portrayal of the intrigue and personal significance that imbue the search to know. (3) Whereas phenomenological

research generally concludes with a presentation of the distilled structures of experience, heuristics may involve reintegration of derived knowledge that itself is an act of creative discovery, a synthesis that includes intuition and tacit understanding. (4) Whereas phenomenology loses the persons in the process of descriptive analysis, in heuristics the research participants remain visible in the examination of the data and continue to be portrayed as whole persons. Phenomenology ends with the essence of experience; heuristics retains the essence of the person in experience. (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985, p. 43)

Phases of heuristic research include:

- Initial engagement – discovery of an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications.
- Immersion – the researcher lives the question. The immersion process enables the researcher to come to be on intimate terms with the question – to live it and grow in knowledge and understanding of it. Virtually anything connected with the question becomes raw material for immersion, for staying with, and for maintaining a sustained focus and concentration. People, places, meetings, readings, nature – all offer possibilities for understanding the phenomenon.
- Incubation – the process in which the researcher retreats from the intense, concentrated focus on the question. The period of incubation enables the inner tacit dimension to reach its full possibilities.

- Illumination – when the researcher is open and receptive to tacit knowledge and intuition. The illumination process may be an awakening to new constituents of the experience, thus adding new dimensions of knowledge. Illumination opens the door to a new awareness, a modification of an old understanding, a synthesis of fragmented knowledge, or an altogether new discovery of something that has been present for some time yet beyond immediate awareness.
- Explication – full elucidation of the descriptive qualities and themes that characterize the experience being investigated. Ultimately, a comprehensive depiction of the core or dominant themes is developed. The researcher explicates the major components of the phenomenon.
- Creative synthesis – the researcher is challenged to put the components and core themes into a creative synthesis. This usually takes the form of a narrative depiction utilizing verbatim material and examples, but it may be expressed as a poem, story, drawing, painting, or by some other creative form.

(Moustakas, 1990, pp. 27-32)

According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), “The ‘data’ that emerge [in a heuristic study] are autobiographical, original, and accurately descriptive of the textures and structures of lived experience....Through exhaustive self-search, dialogues with others, and creative depictions of experience, a comprehensive knowledge is generated” (p. 40).

Furthermore, heuristic self-search inquiry (Sela-Smith, 2002) was incorporated in this research study and required the researcher to conduct self-inquiry by sustained observation of the “I-who-feels” domain (p. 58). In her critique of Moustakas’ method of

heuristics, Sela-Smith (2002) argued that the researcher should not only be related to the stages of inquiry, but the researcher should enter the tacit dimension and “focus on the feeling dimension of personal experience to discover meanings embedded therein” (p. 63). The responsibility is placed on the researcher to report personal, subjective experience, “a place of self-honesty, self-dialogue, and self-disclosure” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 75). Although there are six phases in Moustakas’ model of heuristics, Sela-Smith (2002) emphasized that “the completion of the phases cannot be the focus” (p. 63), and she urged the researcher surrender “to the feeling state of the subjective ‘I’” (p. 63). In addition, Sela-Smith suggested the researcher do the following:

The researcher uses the data within to lift into awareness the experiences that are felt and trigger the *being* of the researcher. In this lifting, an awakening, a greater self-understanding, and personal growth occur and combine to produce self-transformation. When a story is formed with the embedded wholes of the transformation in it, the story itself contains the power to transform anyone who dares to surrender to the listening. (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 64)

Rather than focusing totally on the topic being investigated, or even the co-participants in the study, Sela-Smith (2002) suggested the researcher who is engaged in heuristic self-inquiry should broaden the reporting in third person to also include self-reporting. She cautioned that such an internal orientation may be painful for the researcher:

It can open long-buried wounds; it can lead to feeling terrified, to feeling hurt, to feeling angry. It can result in major life changes when the researcher may not feel ready to make those changes. The experience of life may be turned upside-down

when there is surrender to feeling. Even so, a relentless inward focus can lead to greater self-understanding, self-transformation, and reconstruction of hindering worldview. Silent, painful fears that unconsciously control the experience of life can be acknowledged, heard, felt, and released as they transform. (p. 80)

Research Design

As outlined by Moustakas (1992), Douglass and Moustakas (1985), and Sela-Smith (2002), the heuristic study required the researcher to engage not only with participants who shared their experiences of earning an online degree, but also to engage in ongoing self-reflection of tacit knowledge of the phenomenon of women in online learning. In this study, the researcher wrote a reflection after each interview. The reflexive journal served as an audit trail of documentation to support the “transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 143), and the recalled experiences enriched the explication and description of co-participants. In addition, the reflexive journal served to enrich the self-inquiry and self-disclosure on the part of the researcher. In Chapter V: Transformational Change, the researcher included a section entitled, *Gail – the “I” perspective*. The research study, then, involved nineteen co-participants engaged in heuristic self-search inquiry of the personal development and transformational change of women earning online degrees.

All participants, and the researcher, were women who had earned a fully online degree at least one year prior to the beginning of the study from a university affiliated with the Southern Regional Education Board, and all were able to earn the degree of

their choice only because it was offered online. Furthermore, the researcher sought to examine “personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects” (Riessman, 1993, p. 70), aspects of “human will and transformative action” (Giroux, 1983, p. 13,) as well as “underlying meaning of or ways of experiencing” (Akerlind, 2004, p. 364) the phenomenon of being a woman who had earned a fully online degree.

Sample of the Population

A purposive sample was sought to ensure adequate representation of divergent constructions of reality and divergent viewpoints of the respondents. Distinctly different opinions and perspectives were sought out in order to fully explore the scope of the phenomenon. The eighteen participants who met the criteria for this study were self-selected. They volunteered for the study by contacting the researcher after they were notified by leaders of online master’s degree programs in institutions affiliated with the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB). The leaders of online programs became aware of the study when the researcher submitted a call for participation in March 2006 at an international conference for women in e-learning or sent them a personal email informing them of the study. Participants represented six unique online master’s degree programs from five different public universities affiliated with SREB. Later in this chapter, detailed information is provided about criteria of the study, states which are affiliated with SREB, selection of participants, data collection, data analysis, and the rigor of the data.

Procedures

Beginning in March 2006, when the Institutional Review Board approved the proposed study, the researcher engaged in the process of locating participants for the study, interviewing the participants in person, by telephone, or by interactive video, transcribing and analyzing data gathered during the interview process, writing the dissertation, member checking via email, and peer debriefing via email. All interviews were audio-taped. Upon completion of the interview, each tape was transcribed using a transcribing machine and a word processor with the support of a transcriptionist. The reflective journal was transcribed and printed. The initial analysis involved separating the reflections into thematic units of data. Content or data that were similar were placed into the same receptacle; content or data that did not seem to relate was placed into a different receptacle. Through this process, categories or themes were identified. Additional analyses were conducted to determine the existence of sub-categories, and data from the transcripts of the interviews were compared to support or negate the existence of a category or sub-category.

Call for Participation

In March 2006, the researcher submitted a call for participation to directors of online programs at universities affiliated with the Southern Regional Education Board. The call for participation outlined the procedure for prospective participants to contact the researcher by email to determine eligibility to participate. From March 2006 to May

2006, participants were contacted via email to establish eligibility and to schedule an interview date and time with the researcher. Participants in the program represented six unique online degree programs offered by five universities affiliated with the SREB. All of the universities had traditional campuses and had developed online degree programs to supplement their on-campus programs. The Sixteen States of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) are described in Table 6.

TABLE 6
States Represented in the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB)

Alabama	Florida	Louisiana
Arkansas	Georgia	Maryland
Delaware	Kentucky	Mississippi
North Carolina	Tennessee	West Virginia
Oklahoma	Texas	
South Carolina	Virginia	

Sample Selection

Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants met the criteria for the study. Participants were eligible for the study if they could not have earned the degree of choice at the time they entered the online program had it not been offered online, if they earned the online degree at least one year prior, if they earned the online degree from a university that is a member of the SREB, if they felt they had changed as a result of earning the online degree, and if they agreed to be audio taped during a personal interview lasting approximately two hours. Of the 23 initial respondents, eighteen were found to be eligible for the study. Disallowed respondents were notified by email from the researcher that they did not meet all criteria for the study. Respondents who did meet

the criteria were notified of their status as participants, and a series of emails were exchanged to arrange interviews with each eligible participant.

Data Collection

Interviews took place at a location specified by the participant with the exception of three participants who arranged telephone interviews due to scheduling conflicts. Within the sample, participants represented distinctly different geographic regions and different academic disciplines. Data were collected from participants from June 8, 2006 until September 4, 2006 through conversational interviews that lasted approximately two hours. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (n=14), by Interactive Television (n=1), and by telephone (n=3). Open-ended questions were used during the interview. The researcher added an entry to a reflexive journal after each interview to maintain a record of the investigator's thoughts and reactions following the interview session (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Although participants lived in Texas, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Oregon, New Mexico, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and, in the case of one participant, a country outside the United States, while completing their online degrees, by the time they participated in this research study, they all were located within the contiguous United States. Table 7 indicates where participants were residing at the time they granted an interview for this study.

TABLE 7
States Where Participants Were Residing at the Time of the Interview

Florida	Oregon	New Mexico
Georgia	Pennsylvania	North Carolina
Indiana	Tennessee	Texas

From April 2006 through May 2006, there was an intense period of scheduling, especially with participants who lived in states different from that of the researcher. On June 8, 2006, the first interview was conducted via Interactive Video at the participant's request. On June 11, 13, and 15, 2006, interviews were held in three states that were distant from that of the researcher, requiring approximately 3,000 miles of travel to conduct interviews. Two of the interviews were held in the participants' offices at the universities where they teach, and the third interview was held in the participant's home. On June 23, 2006, the researcher traveled approximately 50 miles to conduct a face-to-face interview. On June 26, 2006, the researcher conducted a telephone interview with a participant who lived in a remote state and could not schedule a face-to-face meeting. The researcher shipped a Web cam to the participant, and an attempt was made to conduct a video connection using Skype, a free video conferencing software, but technical difficulties prevented a successful video conference. The telephone was used, instead, and resulted in a unique opportunity to discuss the value of anonymity in the online environment for this participant. It wasn't until the end of the telephone conversation that she revealed that her race made her very appreciative of anonymity in the online environment. Had the Web cam worked, the effect of anonymity would have been lost, and the outcome of this particular interview would have been dramatically compromised.

On June 29 and June 30, 2006, the researcher traveled approximately 1,000 miles to two different coastal cities to conduct interviews. One of the interviews took place in the participant's home, and the other interview was conducted in the participant's office.

On July 3, 2006, the researcher conducted a telephone interview, again after a failed attempt to connect via Web camera. This participant lived approximately 2,300 miles from the researcher and had a full-time job, so it was easier for her to participate in an interview in the evening after work.

On July 14 and 15, 2006, the researcher traveled 2,000 miles to a large city in the Southwest to conduct interviews with two participants. One interview took place in a public library and the other in a sitting room of a hotel suite. On July 23, 2006, the researcher traveled 350 miles to conduct two interviews. The interviews were held in a reading and learning center because there was not a public library or conference room in the city for the interviews to be held on a Sunday afternoon. The local chamber of commerce assisted the researcher in reaching the owner of a reading and learning center who leased out the center for the afternoon.

On July 28 and 29, 2006, the researcher traveled 700 miles to a city in the Southern United States to conduct three interviews. Two interviews were held in a public library that had once been an historic old home in an elite neighborhood of the city. It was an experience to set up a table and audio recording equipment in the stately meeting room where ornate carvings hung on the walls and statues stood on a fireplace mantle on one side of the room. The third interview was conducted in a sitting room of a hotel where the researcher was a guest.

On August 19, 2006, the researcher traveled 280 miles to conduct an interview with a participant who, by coincidence, was moving her 18-year-old daughter into the

dorm of a university in the vicinity of the researcher. The participant's home state was 1,600 miles from the site of the interview.

On September 4, 2006, the final interview of the study was conducted by telephone with a participant who lived 1,500 miles from the researcher. The participant was engaged in preparing a book manuscript for publication, and her schedule was subject to change, so she favored a telephone interview which could be re-scheduled, if necessary. Again, the Web cam did not work out for this interview, so we elected to talk over the telephone. The three attempts to connect via Web cameras may have failed due to disparate types of video cards and computer systems that were owned by the participants. Although the Web cameras were identical, purchased new and shipped directly to the participants to keep regardless of the outcome of our trial, there were too many variables with each participant's computer system to ensure success. The goal was not to prove that Web cameras could be part of the study, so it was preferable to utilize the telephone when the technology did not work out as planned.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, or "taking constructions gathered from the context and reconstructing them into meaningful wholes" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 333), was conducted on an on-going basis throughout the study. Following each interview, the researcher wrote a detailed reflection. These reflections allowed data analysis to begin immediately and emerge throughout the research phase. Over a five month period, the researcher transcribed the audio recorded interviews. Examination of the data in the transcripts, as

well as the researcher's detailed reflections of each interview, led to the emergence of major themes from the interviews. Similar units of data were placed within receptacles, thus forming themes for categorization purposes. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality. The transcription of interviews was ongoing from June 2006 until February 2007. When transcribing of audio recordings was concluded, the researcher elaborated the themes with verbatim segments from the transcripts. Throughout this time, the researcher engaged in reflection regarding themes, and, in addition, noted reactions to the transcripts. It was emotionally charged for the researcher to talk personally with these women and to transcribe the two-hour conversations because of the strong sense of relatedness the researcher felt with each of the participants.

Rigor of Data

Moustakas (1990) explained the validation of data obtained through a heuristic study:

Validity in heuristics is not a quantitative measurement that can be determined by correlations or statistics. The question of validity is one of meaning: Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's own rigorous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience? This judgment is made by the primary researcher, who is the only person in the investigation who has undergone the heuristic inquiry from the beginning formulation of the question through phases of incubation, illumination,

explication, and creative synthesis not only with himself or herself, but with each and every co-researcher. (p. 32)

In this heuristic research study, the researcher collected and analyzed the material, and returned “again and again to the data to check the depictions of the experience to determine whether the qualities of constituents that have been derived from the data embrace the necessary and sufficient meanings” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 33). This constant checking for significance and judging the data “facilitate the process of achieving a valid depiction of the experience being investigated” (p. 33).

In addition, trustworthiness is established by demonstrating four characteristics: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These elements of trustworthiness will be addressed in the following sections.

Credibility

According to Erlandson et al. (1993), credibility must be established with the individuals who supplied data for the inquiry and “is assessed by determining whether the description developed through inquiry in a particular setting ‘rings true’ for those persons who are members of that setting” (p. 30). Key strategies to establishing credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. The data of this study were acquired through prolonged engagement with participants in the form of emails, a two-hour interview, follow-up emails to ensure accuracy of the data and the researcher’s interpretation of the data,

corrections as stipulated by participants, and final confirmation of accuracy of the data by participants in the form of emails. In addition, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing with a faculty member at Texas A&M University to reduce potential bias with respect to data analysis, findings, conclusions, and recommendations. The peer auditor stayed abreast of findings and provided guidance and feedback that allowed the researcher to refine the inquiry. Triangulation was accomplished by posing the research questions to each of the eighteen participants who represented a viewpoint that was made independent of others in the study and from different lived experience in her interaction with a particular degree program and university. Different theories were brought to bear on the data. In addition, distinctly different opinions were sought out by the researcher, and variance in opinion was then checked against current research and literature.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which findings of a study may be applied in other contexts or with other respondents (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Erlandson et al. (1993), “The naturalistic researcher attempts to describe in great detail the interrelationships and intricacies of the context being studied” (p. 32). By utilizing a detailed, thick description of the participants and relationships, a more meaningful and accurate report is produced which allows the reader to make judgments about the transferability of the information to his or her own context. In this study, the researcher described in detail the context of the participants, deleting only that information which

would breach confidentiality. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal after each interview. The reflexive journal provided documentation of personal observations, questions, ideas, and methodological considerations after each interview. From the reflexive journal, the researcher was able to enrich the description of data in context with sufficient detail and precision so as to allow judgments of transferability. The reflexive journal also brought to the researcher's attention the repeated question asked of the participants as the interview was about to begin: "Why did you earn your master's degree online?"

It became clear to the researcher that many of the women who participated in this study granted the interview only because the researcher met all criteria of the study and had earned a fully online master's degree and because they had been contacted by someone they respected in their master's program. It was not uncommon for participants to ask the researcher, during the interview process, to relate some of her own experience as evidence that she was capable of understanding their experiences. One participant said she only granted an interview because the researcher used the name of a woman who was support staff, or, as the participant said, the "bridge person," in the online program in which the participant earned her degree. The participant said when the researcher used that name, she decided she would grant an interview.

All of these women were working full time, enrolled in a doctoral program as a full time student, or, in some cases, working and trying to complete a doctorate program. They were willing to grant a personal interview because they were contacted by someone they respected in their former online master's program – either the program

director, an advisor, or a support person. It cannot be overstated, however, that these women may have been unlikely to share their personal experiences with someone perceived as a bystander rather than another woman who had also earned an online degree. They may have been unwilling to submit deeply personal experiences in the form of an impersonal survey. These women made it clear to the researcher that they wanted to *tell* their experience to someone who truly understood where they had been and what they had accomplished.

The discovery of new knowledge often begins with a personal form of inquiry, and the heuristic research model was well-suited for this since it “begins with a question or problem which the researcher seeks to illuminate or answer. The question is one that has been a personal challenge...in the search to understand one’s self and the world in which one lives” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 15). This methodology required the researcher to contribute to the study as well as solicit input from co-participants. The purposive sampling which included eighteen participants allowed for emerging insights from representatives of six online programs from five distinct universities and maximized the potential for both typical and divergent data.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability of a study hinges on whether the findings of a study would be repeated if the study were replicated with the same or similar respondents (subjects) in the same (or a similar) context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Evidence of dependability and confirmability are in the researcher’s detailed records and interview notes, reflexive

journal, and the account provided by the researcher regarding the inquiry process. Moustakas (1990) suggested “verification is enhanced by returning to the research participants, sharing with them the meanings and essences of the phenomenon as derived from reflection on and analysis of the verbatim transcribed interviews and other materials, and seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy” (pp. 33-34). This step to confirm and verify the data was taken by the primary researcher in this study. In addition, the peer debriefer knowledgeable about the heuristic inquiry process and procedures served as the inquiry auditor for this study.

It is also important to note the emergent nature of the study which allowed for “trackable variance-variance that can be ascribed to sources” (Guba, 1981, p. 81). Prior to turning on the tape recorder during each interview, the researcher explained that questions would be provided if needed, but the participant was free to not answer any questions. Questions were provided to participants to begin the conversation about their experience and included the following:

- Why did you choose to earn an online degree?
- Was there one decisive moment in your life, or was there a series of events, that motivated you?
- Describe the changes you've experienced as a result of earning the online degree.
- What opportunities have come your way as a result of earning the online degree?
- Describe barriers you encountered when considering an advanced degree, how you overcame the barriers or how online learning helped you overcome them, and the role they played in your completing the degree. (Institutional barriers;

situational barriers which might include children to care for, geographic distance, elderly family, work, etc.; or dispositional barriers such as self-doubt, previous bad experiences in education, etc.)

- How did your relationship with others change as you completed your education?
- How did your perspective of the world change as a result of earning the degree?
- How have you, as a person, changed as a result of earning the degree?
- Describe the most important outcome of earning the online degree.
- Describe your feelings about online learning and how this form of educational delivery met your needs and its potential to help other women meet their educational goals.
- What did you value most in your online instructors and/or program advisor?
- How important is this educational delivery method to other women? Why?
- How important was anonymity in the online environment to you as a learner? Why?
- What is your response to the quote by Noe (2002), “Men get evaluated based on their potential, women based on their performance” (p. 348)? Was this in any way a motivation for your pursuit of an online degree?

No participant ever expressed any unwillingness to answer any questions, although responses to some questions were elaborated on by some participants more than others. New topics emerged during the interview process, usually because they were of particular interest to the participant. For example, one participant wanted to discuss the anonymity of the online environment and why that was critical to her. Another

participant introduced the idea that women who have earned an online degree might be a resource for women trying to find information about online education. Twice, participants asked the researcher to turn off the recorder, which she did, while the participant related a personal example or story that did not relate directly to the interview.

As each participant elaborated on a particular question, the researcher encouraged her to continue discussing that topic. A different question was provided only when the participant indicated she had given a full explanation about the current topic and wanted another question to be provided. For the most part, participants began talking about one of the possible question topics without being prompted. It was natural for them to broaden the scope of each topic as they elaborated on their personal experiences, and questions were often answered without being asked by the researcher.

The interviews were charged with a feeling of excitement as the participant related her own personal experience. There was a feeling of kinship between the participant and the researcher. The women in this study were self-selected – they contacted the researcher to volunteer for the study. So, as might be expected, they were eager to talk about their experiences and often expressed a feeling of gratitude to the researcher for being given an opportunity to relate their experiences of earning an online degree. The majority of the women in this study also expressed a desire to see universities offer more online programs and, particularly, online programs leading to higher degrees, such as the Ph.D., for women who have limited access to traditional education. Several participants pointed out that they themselves were waiting for an

online Ph.D. program since they could not commute, leave their jobs, or uproot their families in order to complete a Ph.D. at a traditional university.

The two-hour interview session ended all too quickly for both the researcher and the participant, but the time limit had been agreed upon before-hand and was included in institutional review board standards for this research project. No follow-up interviews were necessary. After all of the interviews had been completed, the researcher transcribed the audio taped interviews over a period of several months. This process was emotionally charged as the researcher re-lived each interview and heard once again the personal accounts shared by the participants.

When this process was completed, member checking took place. On June 26, 2007, full transcripts of the interviews were sent via email to each participant individually to ensure accuracy. Some of the participants noted that the information in the full transcripts could be used to identify a participant; however, the researcher clarified through email that the full transcripts were not used. Instead, excerpts taken from the full transcripts were used in the dissertation, and confidentiality was maintained by removing from those excerpts any information that might identify a participant. The researcher then emailed the excerpts used in the dissertation to each participant for her to consider and review.

When the participants read the excerpts used in the dissertation, they were satisfied that any clue to their identities, including geographic location, job, or degree program, had been removed. At that point, only a few minor corrections were requested. After corrections were made by the researcher, a follow-up email was sent to each

participant for final approval of the information to be used in the dissertation. From June 26, 2007, to July 26, 2007, the participants sent email messages to the researcher verifying that the excerpts of the transcripts which were used in the dissertation, and the researcher's interpretation of the data, were accurate. Confirmation of the data was provided to the faculty member serving as auditor of the inquiry process.

Many of the women in the study commented that it was strange, and at times emotional, to read their own words on paper. One of the participants, whose pseudonym for this study is Dedra, granted me permission to include her final email response:

I was surprised at the level of emotion I felt reading my words again. I'm grateful to you for consolidating my experiences with those of other subjects into a form that will make them accessible to others going through similar life situations. I've found myself in the past few years thinking when faced with a challenging circumstance, "This is your lucky day. Life is giving you another invitation to learn something you should probably already have learned. You have the choice of fighting it and learning the hard way or embracing it and making the task easier." I hope your research will make the learning challenges easier for everyone you touch.

The heuristic research method, and the self-search inquiry method, allowed the maximum opportunity for the participants in this study to share their experiences without limitations. This also opened the door for new information about a relatively new area of research. From this information may come foundations for theory development and identifiable factors affecting online learning that may be investigated using a variety of

research methodologies. As noted earlier, however, it was critical to begin this investigation into the learning outcomes, personal development and transformation of women earning an online degree with methodology that delved into the holistic and human aspects of the context of the learning.

CHAPTER IV

PERSPECTIVES OF PARTICIPANTS AFTER EARNING AN ONLINE DEGREE

This heuristic inquiry follows the model of recreating “the lived experience. . . . from the frame of reference of the experiencing person” (Moustakas, 1990, p. 39) with “verbatim examples” (p. 54). As a whole, all of the women in this study were, in retrospect, somewhat amazed by the opportunities that came their way as a result of having earned the online degree. For some, change meant a new job, for others, it meant seeing themselves in such a radically new way that they altered the course of their lives and embarked on an entirely new, independent journey.

Over a period of weeks, there was a series of email exchanges with participants in order to establish their eligibility for the study, to set a preferred date, time, and location for an interview, and to answer questions about the upcoming interview. It became evident that each of the women was eager to share her experience with someone who valued her struggle to earn the master’s degree in a nontraditional format. All of the participants expressed a sense of pride in having earned the master’s degree, and the majority had balanced a career and family while doing so. Initially, the women of this study sought the online degree for additional credentials for their current jobs or to try and secure a different job, and the online mode of delivery allowed them to overcome barriers that might have otherwise prevented them from reaching their goals. All of them shared positive outcomes, both personal and professional, from having earned the degree; a smaller number, approximately a third, of the women experienced significant

transformational change from the learning experience. The transformational change led to dramatic shifts in their perspectives and, as a result, new courses of action in their lives, and discussion of this group of participants is discussed in more detail in Chapter V.

The women of this study often questioned me about my prior experience in online learning. They visibly changed their expressions or the tone of their voices when we met face-to-face or by telephone and they established my status as one who had earned a fully online master's degree. There was no doubt a more open line of communication was established because of this similarity. There was also no doubt that the heuristic research design, and the heuristic self-search inquiry design, were the foundations for investigating in greater depth the experiences of these women, with the researcher serving as a co-participant. As the eighteen primary participants shared their experiences of earning an online degree, the discussions were open-ended, and they were free to add topics; however, each interview began with these questions: Why did you choose to earn an online degree? Describe the changes you've experienced as a result of earning the online degree. What opportunities have come your way as a result of earning the online degree?

Table 8 provides the starting point of the discussion with each woman and indicates why she sought a non-traditional online master's degree rather than a traditional on-campus degree. Although geographic distance played a significant role, other considerations aligned with barriers categorized as *institutional* – exclusionary higher education institution practices; *situational* – sociological, familial, financial,

residential, and personal factors; and *dispositional* – attitudes, motivation and personality factors (Ekstrom, 1972; Redding & Dowling, 1992).

TABLE 8
Why Participants Chose an Online Degree

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Participant 1: Regina	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She worked full time and needed the degree to get a job teaching and training teachers. • The degree she sought was not offered at local colleges.
Participant 2: Adah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She moved to new location because of husband's job, and the degree she sought was not offered near her. • She became pregnant with her first child and suffered bouts of all-day sickness during much of her pregnancy. "I would throw up in a trash can, go back to the course, throw up again, and return to the course. It was terrible, but I was so grateful that I could continue with my coursework; if the program had not been online, there is no way I could have completed my degree."
Participant 3: Paige	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She was told she would have to wait a year-and-a-half before she could <i>apply</i> to the master's program at a prestigious university. Angered, she found two universities offering the same degree program online, contacted both universities, and applied for acceptance to the university that showed genuine interest in her as a prospective student. • Within two weeks, she had taken the entrance exam and was accepted into the program. She smiled broadly, "I like to tell people that I had my entire degree and also had a job teaching at a university by the time I would have been allowed to apply to the program at the elite university."
Participant 4: Dedra	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She wanted to relate technology to academic content and needed the master's to clarify what was emerging in educational technology. However, she did not live near a university that offered the degree.
Participant 5: Denise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived in a rural geographic location and had young children still in school. Most importantly, she said, the online degree was "minimally invasive into my home life." • She enrolled in an online degree to "learn the material so I could be more successful in my job."
Participant 6: Marion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived in a rural area where there were no institutions providing the master's degree required by her job. • She enrolled in an online program at a university located in another state, but her employer paid all costs so she didn't worry about the out-of-state tuition rate.
Participant 7: Alex	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The job she had as a teacher of history in a museum had no future. The city supporting the museum suggested lowering the pay of the museum employees. "That was the moment I realized I had to do something." • She worked and had small children at home.
Participant 8: Diana	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She was a single parent who didn't want to miss time with her two children. She worked, but needed a higher paying job. • She was afraid of driving two hours at night alone on a road that was under major construction to reach a university.
Participant 9: Kim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She had dropped out of a traditional master's program because class meetings were controlled by domineering personalities who ridiculed those with disparate views. She wanted a learning environment that was more democratic and less likely to be controlled by strong personalities in class. • She wanted to enroll in a program that was flexible and would allow her to continue her job.
Participant 10: Aileen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived 80 miles from the nearest university. • As a single parent, the drive would have required her to be away from home and her child. "That was not an option."

TABLE 8 continued

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Participant 11: Lauren	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived an hour away from an institution. • She had two children still at home and worked full time as director of technology staff development at the local school. • She described herself as shy. "Being behind a computer screen, I had more confidence." • She wanted an opportunity to interact with people far away from her small town. • "It was a personal choice to see if I could do it."
Participant 12: Martha	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She admitted an aversion to traditional education. "I don't like sitting in class. I like to cleep things. The thought of having to sit through classes was not acceptable. A very big thing to me was to be able to earn the master's on my time, my terms, at my pace." She lived approximately 100 miles from a university. • She had a 6-year-old and a 4-year-old at home and wanted to show her children that education is important.
Participant 13: Taylor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived two to three hours from a university and had small children. "I liked being at home; I could be with my children, and I could cook supper. I spent more time with my kids because of the nature of online. I didn't have to spend the time driving."
Participant 14: Meira	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She had a personal goal. "I always wanted to earn a master's degree. My husband was in the military, so we moved a great deal." She worked full time at a university that did not offer the degree of her choice.
Participant 15: Belle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She lived at least an hour away from a university and had a six-month-old baby when she started the online degree. • She was working full time, and her husband was in school and working full time. The online degree accommodated staying with her family.
Participant 16: Cara	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The highly specialized degree she had always wanted was finally offered online by one university in the country.
Participant 17: Gillian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She worked full time, had a child in school still living at home; the university nearest her didn't offer the degree she wanted.
Participant 18: Stella	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She was an American living in a foreign country and managing her own business there. • She could not get the degree necessary for a desired career change through the educational system of that country.

In the remainder of this chapter, information from the interviews with participants is shared under the following major topic headings:

- Barriers to Higher Education
- Benefits of Online Education
- Professional Development
- Personal Development
- The Impact on Others
- Double Standard for Women

- Higher Education's Need for Change
- Concern for Other Women
- Excellent Online Instructors

Barriers to Higher Education

In her study of women in online learning, Kramarae (2001) found a growing migration of women toward online learning due to the flexible nature of the course delivery and, by nature of the flexible delivery, alleviate many of the barriers women face when trying to acquire higher education. Kramarae (2001) elaborated:

Women are the primary users of online education. . . . Second, many women returning to college classes face significant barriers not usually experienced by men, or at least not experienced to the same degree. Many women balance job, community, and heavy family responsibilities against their academic work. They often have serious financial burdens. Traditionally they have grappled with these difficulties while also facing inflexible class schedules and academic policies, inadequate childcare, lack of appropriate housing, and lack of reliable transportation. (Kramarae, 2001, p. 5)

This study revealed that barriers to higher education still remain for women. The barriers encountered by women in this study were largely overcome due to the flexibility of online learning, but their potential to derail women from successful attainment of education prompts closer examination. Barriers described by these women were in three categories:

1. institutional barriers
 - a. faculty attitude,
 - b. unavailability of needed degree programs, and
 - c. undesirable face-to-face classroom environments;
2. situational barriers
 - a. illness while expecting a child,
 - b. responsibilities associated with being the primary caregiver,
 - c. geographic location,
 - d. family opposition, and
 - e. poor internet connectivity;
3. dispositional barriers
 - a. need for anonymity, and
 - b. preference for learner-centered instruction.

Institutional Barriers

According to Ekstrom (1972), institutional barriers are “institutional factors that serve to exclude women from participation in post-secondary education include admissions practices, financial aid practices, institutional regulations, types of curriculum and services adopted, and faculty and staff attitudes,” (p. i). Participants in this study noted poor faculty attitudes, the unavailability of degree choices, and poor classroom management in undesirable classroom environments as barriers they had faced in traditional education settings.

Faculty Attitude. This was especially clear in the case of Paige, who was told she would have to wait at least a year-and-a-half to apply to a master's program at an elite institution 30 minutes away from her home. Paige described her encounter at the university: "It was January, and I was met by a prominent woman who quickly sized me up. She seemed elitist." Angered by this attitude, Paige applied instead to an online master's program. "Elite institutions seem to think they have to throw up barriers; it is a form of hazing," Paige said emphatically, then she added, "I like to tell people that I had my entire degree and also had a job teaching at a different university by the time I would have been allowed to apply to the program at the elite university." I was struck by the decisiveness Paige demonstrated by refusing to be defeated when encountering the institutional barriers put in place at an elite, traditional university. Instead, she sought and found an online degree as a flexible, and beneficial, alternative. The credentials Paige gained from the online master's degree earned her a faculty position at a university recognized for its master's degree programs. Furthermore, Paige indicated to me that the thesis research and the diversity of the online environment prepared her well for her new academic career. Paige suggested the "mind-to-mind" communication with peers living in the United States, Europe, and around the world, better prepared her for the international research in which she is now engaged and the rigors of her academic discipline.

Unavailability of the Needed Degree. Cara's situation was unique in that the master's degree she sought was not offered by any university anywhere in the country when she first decided to enter graduate school. Because of the unavailability of the

degree, Cara applied and was accepted to an alternate program at a nearby university. Then, in 2003, Cara learned the degree she had been waiting for was to be offered as an online program by one university in the country. The university offering the degree was accredited and reputable, and the program gained even more credibility and recognition through a partnership between the institution and a government organization with which Cara was affiliated. Cara described her decision to seek the online degree:

I realized I needed more education because jobs are very competitive. At first, I thought the online program would be intimidating because I would be in class with people who had other backgrounds, and I had an undergraduate degree in business. However, immediately, I felt it was a good environment. My contributions were appreciated, and there was such a variety of contributions.

Undesirable Face-to-face Classroom Environment. Kim, on the other hand, uprooted her family and moved to a city to enroll in a university that had a reputable master's degree in the discipline in which Kim was working and needing credentials. Classes for the program were offered as week-end intensives in a crowded room of 50 people where they sat in uncomfortable wooden chairs. In addition, the instructor in the class did not maintain a safe classroom environment. Kim shared with me why she ultimately left the program:

Kim: I didn't feel safe asking questions in class because some people in the class were extroverts who would speak out of turn and divert the conversation away from the issues we were discussing for class. Only their ideas were the accepted ideas. Usually students rely on the

instructor to quell that, and it didn't happen. On this weekend, class had the people very "riled up." I spoke and shared my answer, and one of the extroverts turned around in her chair and shook her head at me and said, "No, you are wrong." The instructor didn't say anything. And, I was kind of surprised because it didn't happen with a lot of the instructors that we had. And, so I don't know if it was because we saw them so infrequently that they didn't feel comfortable, or they didn't feel they had time to retrain these people to behave themselves. I'm not sure what their thoughts were. They are a premier program and don't feel that they have to seek students. And, the instructor didn't deal with that, and I'm saying it a little nicer than it happened. So, I just thought, "Why am I paying money to be in an environment I just...because after that, even if I had the exact right answer, there was no way I was going to share that because she was going to turn around and tell me I was off my rocker. So, it just wasn't a safe feeling to share things. After that we took a break. I stayed for the rest of the class, but shortly after that I dropped out of the program.

Question: Did the rest of the class support her in being so rude?

Kim: Yes. This one individual was very pushy, very outgoing. There were others, because this was not our first class as a cohort together, and I was not the only person who was shocked by the behavior or had

issues working with this one individual, but I just thought, “I’m paying for this, there are other options.”

Question: And, the instructor didn’t say anything?

Kim: No. Of course, after she [the student] said that, I got really quiet, and no one offered any other ideas. I think actually after that they kind of said, “Oh, let’s take a break.” I stayed for the rest of the class, but it was shortly after that that I dropped the class, and I told them I was not coming back.

Situational Barriers

According to Ekstrom (1972), “Situational barriers that deter women from participation in further education include family responsibilities, financial need, and societal pressures” (p. i). Redding and Dowling (1992) suggested situational barriers “include sociological, familial, financial, residential, and personal factors” (p. 224). Ekstrom (1972) elaborated:

Family conditions that can influence a woman’s participation in post-secondary education include: (1) attitudes of parents or husband, (2) head-of-household responsibilities, (3) family size and child-care responsibilities, (4) care of ill or elderly family members, (5) lack of household assistance, (6) lack of privacy for study, and (7) mobility due to the husband’s career. (p. 45)

All of the eighteen participants reported facing situational barriers. The most common was residential: geographic location away from an institution that offered the desired

master's degree. In addition, there were familial concerns: illness while expecting a child, small children at home, time away from children, or time away from the home itself, and also concerns of job retention or career advancement. Poor Internet connectivity proved to be a barrier for some, even after enrolling in an online degree program. In most instances, the participants in this study faced several barriers that, combined, could have prevented them from earning a traditional degree.

Illness While Expecting a Child. Adah, who moved with her husband to accommodate his career as an instructor at a university, became pregnant and suffered bouts of all-day sickness during her entire pregnancy. Adah described how she was able to complete an online degree in spite of her circumstances:

In January, I got pregnant, and I was horribly ill, and it was my first pregnancy. I remember sitting in front of my laptop with the trash can next to me. And, I would be sitting there in class, literally picking up the trash can, “taking care of business” and being back on, but being so grateful at the same time I could continue with my course work. If the program had not been online, there is no way I could have completed my degree. I could throw-up all the way through class, and, it wasn't bothering anybody.

Responsibilities Associated with Being Primary Caregiver. Aileen was a single parent who lived 80 miles from a university that offered the degree she was seeking. She worked full time, and driving more than an hour to and from the university would have required her to be away from her child. Aileen felt strongly “this was not an option,” so she finally responded to a university's persistent marketing of their fully online program

because she felt she could attend to her daughter while pursuing an online master's degree. Aileen explained:

Aileen: My ex-husband left before my daughter was born and hasn't been involved in her life. So, I'm her only parent. If I don't care for her, nobody is going to, sort of thing.

Question: So, that played a part in your decision to seek an online degree?

Aileen: Yes, I gave up my previous career because my time was taken away from my own kid to spend time with other people's kids. I would not have liked pursuing any degree that took me away from home.

Diana was a single parent and was motivated to earn an online degree because she needed a higher paying job. Earning a traditional degree would have required her to drive at night on a road that was under major construction worked full time and miss time with her two children.

Geographic Location. Taylor lived two to three hours from a university and "couldn't drive three hours every night after work. I liked being at home; I could be with my children, and I could cook supper. I spent more time with my kids because of the nature of online. I didn't have to spend the time driving." Taylor's educational background prepared her for a non-traditional master's degree since she completed only one year of college in the traditional manner. In her mind, "it was a natural progression to get the master's degree online."

Denise lived in a small, rural town and worked full time at a local community college. She was not located near a four-year university, and her educational

opportunities were limited. “Living in a very rural area, it’s not like there’s that much down the road,” she said. Denise and her husband also had a blended family with at least three school-aged children at home. Although Denise needed a master’s degree to advance in her job, she was emphatic that seeking an advanced degree was a consideration only if it was “minimally invasive” into her home.

Gillian lived in a rural area 35 miles from a major university that did not offer the degree of her choice. She had a daughter attending junior high school and still living at home, so she was unwilling to move her family or to quit her job. Meira, on the other hand, was familiar with ongoing barriers to education and had been forced to earn many of the credits in her undergraduate degree by taking correspondence courses:

My husband was in the military, so we moved a great deal. I was familiar with the old model of distance education; it took me 20 years to get my bachelor’s degree. I started looking for a master’s degree and found the online master’s degree.

Lauren chose to earn an online master’s degree because she was employed full time at the local school district in a rural town that had a population of just over 3,000 people. She had two children at home, one in junior high school and the other in high school, and there were no universities within driving distance.

Stella faced a unique situation being an American living in a foreign country where she owned her own business. She needed a master’s degree to make a career change, but the education system in the foreign country created an obstacle for advancement:

I came to the decision gradually that I needed a master's degree, and there was no local alternative. I was in the middle of a career change, and I wanted to complete a master's degree, but I couldn't participate in on-site meetings. I was living in a foreign country, and every program was advertised as online, but it still required several face-to-face meetings. This was 1998, and it was kind of hard to figure out who was serious and who was an actual university. I was lucky enough to find the fully online program at an accredited university in the United States. I knew the program came from an actual brick and mortar university that was accredited. Also, I talked to the program secretary and the program director who also put me in touch with some of their past students so I could talk to someone who had gone through the program. So, I felt pretty confident.

Marion accepted a teaching position at a university, and a requirement of the new position was that she pursue a master's degree in order to advance to assistant professor and teach additional courses. The university agreed to pay for her master's degree, but Marion described how her location created a barrier to accessing the degree she needed:

One of the challenges that I immediately faced in moving to a rural environment was that there were no immediate master's programs or schools around that I might be able to commute to. There were plenty of undergraduate colleges nearby, but I think the closest university that I might have considered was about an hour to an hour-and-a-half away. The offerings that were locally available through the university partnerships were very limited in the kinds of degrees that they offered and weren't even in the field that I would be teaching, and so they

wouldn't count toward teaching credits and having graduate course work in the area that I was teaching in. And so, it was really forced by necessity because of the geographical distance to the online degree.

Family Opposition. Paige's family opposed her idea of earning a master's degree. She described how her ability to complete the degree over the Internet – completing school work at night and on weekends - helped her overcome the opposition:

Well, my family thought that I should not be - they were not very supportive. My parents had relocated at the same time as us, and we were all living together in the same house while we were trying to find the house, the houses we would be buying for our future. We were renting one big house. So, my parents and my husband, so I had these three adults kind of thinking, "This is a good time for you to, you know, you've been working for 20 years, it's a good time to stop out and enjoy your young children. Why would you be trying to go and get an advanced degree and go start working again right away? Why not stop and just enjoy?" You know, I had a 2-year-old and a 9-year-old at the time that I started in the online program. You know, take time to be with them. But, that's my personality and the way my makeup is. I wouldn't have felt like a complete person had I not had another thing to be doing. And, my children never suffered from any of this because everything that I was doing was flexible. I was working on my degree on nights and weekends; I was teaching some night classes at school here, but it was only a couple of days a week, and then when I started on the faculty I was teaching during their school hours when they were going to be in school anyway.

So, I don't feel that I deprived my family at all, but I did have family pressure from my husband and my parents.

Marion also experienced opposition from her extended family:

Throughout my master's degree and my Ph.D. degree there have been some in my own family that just refuse to acknowledge it. They don't support it, they don't acknowledge it, whether it's out of jealousy or they think that I'm taking something away from my family that they don't understand, and they consider it a sacrifice, and that I'm not doing something that a mother should do.

Alex's parents questioned the validity of her online degree. She explained, "Parents aren't always the nicest people. They questioned whether the online degree was a real degree."

Poor Internet Connectivity. Belle lived an hour from a university, had an infant, and she worked full time. In addition, Belle described how poor connectivity to the Internet presented challenges even after she enrolled in the online degree program:

I was on dial-up until about a month ago because we live out in the middle of nowhere, and there just wasn't anything available. So, sometimes the chat rooms and stuff, or a storm, would blow me right out of the water, and I wouldn't be able to participate in class. That made life interesting.

Martha lived approximately 100 miles from a university and had only a dial-up connection to the Internet until the second year of her master's program. She indicated that much more reliable digital subscriber line (DSL) connectivity finally made it to her small community:

But that was only within town, and we actually lived right outside of town. So, if I was at home, it was dial-up. If I went into town there to the courthouse where my husband worked, then I could get on DSL. So, when it came to chat time, I was a lot of time up at the courthouse.

However, despite the challenges of poor connectivity, Martha chose the online degree primarily because she had a 6-year-old and a 4-year-old at home, and she worked full time. She explained:

If the online degree had not been available, I probably would have gone back to get the degree when my children were much older. My children came first. I would not have chosen to drive that distance. I did not want to be away from my children that much. It's not fair that we have to choose, but that's life. You have to find what works for your family. My husband is very supportive. Online education takes away some of the pressure to choose between family and getting an education or even between work and an education.

Dispositional Barriers

According to Ekstrom (1972), "Dispositional barriers that prevent women from continuing education include their fear of failure, attitude toward intellectual activity, role preference, ambivalence about educational goals, level of aspiration, passivity, dependence, and inferiority feelings" (p. i). There were also dispositional barriers related to attitudes, motivation, and personality. More than one participant described herself as

shy and emphasized the need to participate in a learning environment that was safe and democratic.

Need for Anonymity. For Marion, anonymity was critical. “I am an African American woman with an ethnically neutral voice,” she revealed to me near the end of our telephone interview. She explained that the online environment freed her from prejudice and bias often encountered in the face-to-face classroom, and she added this comment: “It wasn’t until I went to the campus to defend my thesis that my advisor found out I was African American. He said he thought I was blonde-haired and blue-eyed.”

Lauren commented, “Being behind a computer screen, I had more confidence.” For Kim, anonymity in the online environment “was actually pretty important . . . it gave me the courage to come out with new ideas and even to contradict what people were saying.”

Preference for Learner-centered Instruction. From a learner’s perspective, Meira said she preferred the online environment because “the instructors respected what we needed, and I didn’t feel that in the face-to-face environment. In face-to-face classes, the emphasis is on the instructor’s delivery.” Taylor’s experience of having to seek her education in a non-traditional manner shaped her philosophy of learning, and she said she does not want to go back on a “traditional campus; I don’t have time. I don’t learn that way – sit and get. You can sit and get or you can actively participate. I like to participate.”

Clearly, the women in this study faced significant barriers that were institutional, situational, and dispositional in nature, but the participants clearly indicated that online learning made it possible for them to overcome barriers that had previously limited or prevented their access to higher education. Although barriers were part of the discussion, they focused more on the benefits of online education in the form of personal and professional development, the impact of online education on others, the double standard for women that still exists in the work place, higher education's need for change, concern they felt for other women, and characteristics of excellent online instructors.

Themes Revealed through Interviews with Participants

The open-ended discussions with the women in this study revealed themes related to their experiences of earning an online degree, and themes emerged throughout the study. For example, one participant asked me why I had not questioned here about anonymity in the online environment. She elaborated on why this topic was critical to her experience in earning the online degree. Other participants in the study were asked about anonymity, and it became apparent this was a topic of importance, for a variety of reasons, to the women engaged in online learning. An overview of the themes and sub-themes as presented by the participants is categorized in the remainder of the chapter as follows:

1. Benefits of Online Education
 - a. Connectedness with Instructors and Peers
 - b. Flexibility

- c. Greater Diversity
 - d. Safe Learning Environment
 - e. Anonymity
 - f. Engaged Learning
2. Professional Development
 - a. New Career Opportunities
 - b. Connectedness in a Professional Community
 - c. Credibility Among Peers
 3. Personal Development
 - a. Self-respect and Confidence
 - b. Inner Strength to be a Role Model
 4. The Impact on Others
 - a. The Domino Effect of Earning an Online Degree
 - b. Relationship Changes
 5. Double Standard for Women
 - a. Women Still Face Discrimination
 - b. Perspectives of Women in Female-Dominated Professions
 6. Higher Education's Need for Change
 - a. Avoid Barriers Created by Leadership
 - b. Expand Access to Higher Education
 - c. Support Quality in Online Education
 7. Concern for Other Women

- a. Potential Solutions for Women
 - b. Sharing Expertise with Other Women
8. Excellent Online Instructors
- a. Characteristics of Excellent Online Instructors
 - b. Selecting Online Instructors

Recorded below are excerpts from the narratives to support these themes. These themes, a primary focus in the study, add to existing knowledge about critical issues for women in online education, an area of research “only now being recognized” (Kramarae, 2001, p. 6).

Benefits of Online Education

Several themes emerged from this study. Participants’ access to the graduate degree of their choice was possible only because the degree was delivered online; the participants felt the online environment provided many benefits that enabled them to successfully complete their master’s degrees. The online delivery provided heightened connectedness to the instructor and peers. Online education also provided flexibility for participants who were working, caring for children, or were single parents. The online classes represented students living across the United States and overseas, so class discussions and contributions from peers were more diverse than they might have been at a local university where the participants were culturally homogenous. Some of the women found the online environment to be richer in dialogue with their instructors and peers, safer than a face-to-face environment where certain personalities often dominate,

and more democratic due to anonymity that eliminated bias attributed to race or gender.

Lauren suggested that online learning may not be for some personality types:

Strong, domineering students in the face-to-face classroom aren't always strong, domineering students in the online classroom. A lot of self-discipline is required. Students need to be strong writers. I write better than I speak. It is good for visual learners who respond better to text.

This engaged form of learning in an environment focused on intellect rather than gender or race led many participants to change their preference for traditional face-to-face education to a preference for the online learning environment. Marion pointed this out clearly:

I'm an African-American woman, and for me being in an online environment where race and color did not figure into the equation at all was very important, and I think it did change dramatically the kind of response that I got not only from my peers but also from my professors who had no idea who or what I was or what I looked like.

In addition, the women in this study said they felt more control over their learning; no longer were they passively sitting in the class taking notes. Alex said the active discussion board in her online course provided her the opportunity to "reflect, refine my answer, then say exactly what I meant." Meira concluded, "I was really able to tailor the results of my degree based upon what I wanted to get out of it." Instead of passively learning, they were responsible for acquiring knowledge, collaborating with

peers, and reflecting on the learning to a far greater degree than in previous educational settings.

Connectedness with Instructors and Peers. Interactivity was an important component of the online environment for these women. Through collaborative projects, asynchronous discussion board reflections, synchronous chats, and email from the instructor, these women expressed not only a sense of community, but in many cases they expressed that it was a greater sense of connection than what they had experienced in their previous face-to-face traditional educational experiences.

Dedra explained how the online interaction fostered a sense of connectedness with others in the class:

It wasn't like just sitting there reading a book or going through a tutorial or, you know, some other kind of learning experience. It was an actual interaction with some other people on the other end. So, it was a connected experience, and not just a self-study, independent study kind of experience. And, I think a lot of people assume that because you learn online that means you just plug in periodically and kind of check your email and it's almost like a correspondence course except that it's electronic rather than by ground mail. And, it's really not like that at all. The really powerful experiences are ones in which you have that connection with somebody else, and they're sitting right there on the top of your desk, and it's different from sitting side-by-side with somebody in class, I guess, you know, where we're all kind of in tandem, we're all learning this way. It's more of an, not an eye-to-eye, but where you are free to interact much more

spontaneously, you know, in the chats, that's primarily what I'm thinking of. So, for me, I think, it is certainly no worse, and most of the time it's better. I've never had a, I've never had - I really have sat through many, many, many, many bad classes, but I don't know that I've ever had an online chat that wasn't invigorating to me.

Belle offered this summary of her connection to instructor and peers:

I felt more connected to the professor than I did in my undergraduate work. Synchronous chats made me think about the material and really brainstorm. I learned to type faster, and I felt very connected. All classes required an introduction, some had a picture posted online, and some allowed a page of biography. The first week is an introductory week. This helps ease the discomfort about interacting online because if you say something to embarrass yourself, at least no one is looking. Some people say things because they feel braver. I went to conferences and finally met the program advisor, and I met another lady in my classes who worked at another education service center. It's very strange to feel that you know someone without ever meeting them. Through the discussion board and interactions and group projects, we were forced into a relationship, and that is not a bad thing to engage with people in different areas. Synchronous chatting opens that up more than asynchronous. This helps you know people as they really are. I didn't expect perfect grammar. When I met this lady, we immediately got on together because we had known each other online for quite a while. We had a history.

Belle admitted there were some disadvantages in the online environment, and she had the unique viewpoint of both online student and online instructor:

Some of the cons were not being able to see people face-to-face and lack of emotion. I remember panicking when a class member had a name that could have been either male or female, and I panicked wondering if I ever sent an email indicating he was a female. I also remember one professor who seemed downright rude. Because he wasn't there in person, he may have felt that gave him the right to be rude. Now that I'm teaching online, I had a student who was so rude that I started copying his messages to the person who hired me to teach online. I asked myself, "Would he [the student] have done that in a face-to-face class?" I don't know. What you say in a typed message doesn't always convey the same meaning.

Aileen shared that she was allowed to express her opinions freely without fear of reprisal, and she applied the constraints of communicating with a professor in the traditional education and office setting to communications with an online instructor:

I really loved that I could tell the professors exactly what I thought. One in particular would listen to what I had to say. He would acknowledge what I said. If he disagreed, he would present why he felt that way. That was refreshing that he would let me think for myself. I could email either of two people. I sometimes had to wait several days – through the weekend – to get an answer. This is the same as if I were in a face-to-face class. I had to stop and think about that in the online class. We are so used to immediate communication. We have to remember

the instructors are people. We expect everybody to be accessible all the time. It is a society thing. I never had to call anybody about my specific program.

Everything was done via email. I never heard their voices.

Gillian utilized email and felt it allowed her a connection that not only mirrored a face-to-face conversation but gave her more access to the instructor than a student located at the university:

I had access to professors via email and phone. At times, I got more attention from the online professors than a resident student does. I felt connected to all of the people in the program; they were very open and very caring people. I never had to wait more than 24 hours for a response, and there were times where if I happened to be sitting at my desk and they happened to be sitting at their desk, we could almost carry on a conversation. Now, I didn't expect that all the time, by any means, but it worked, and I probably had more contact in that day than a resident student would have gotten.

Martha described a high level of interaction in her master's degree program between students and instructors:

In an online class, you are not sitting in an audience with the instructor talking to a large group. You are one-on-one with an instructor focused on your topics, specific needs, and goals. I think you get more of a personalized education. So, in that way, your education is better. I mean, it's more in depth. You are able to study further and actually communicate with the instructors more.

Martha also described the relationship she had with one particular instructor:

Even when I wasn't taking her class any more, I still continued to talk with her, bounce ideas off of her, and continue working with her. Once I moved here, I still have a relationship with her in doing stuff with my current school. It really built a bond there with her.

The online program enabled Martha to pick and choose the level of interaction through the courses she took, thus indicating to her that the program director and instructors had an awareness of varied learning styles among students. Martha described how she chose courses within the online program:

I chose the more interactive courses because I wanted to interact with people. I chose a program with higher levels of interactivity. I read course descriptions, and I looked for online chats as a requirement of the courses; I called and asked how the courses were run.

Martha said this desire for interaction with other adult learners "could be especially true for mom's taking online classes. This is their adult conversation." She added that she often stayed online after class just to talk with others in the class. Taylor, on the other hand, expressed a preference for discussion boards over chat sessions:

I don't like chat. Literally, the first question I asked was, "Will there be chat?" I preferred the discussion board because I can put my opinion out there and respond when someone commented on it. I didn't like things that had time constraints.

Aileen described a highly interactive environment in her master's program with both discussion boards and chats. In the discussion board, she felt she had time to think about

her answers and post them when the time was convenient for her. The chats posed some problems for her because she didn't have as much time to think about her response, and it was a challenge because she lived in a different time zone than the instructor.

Question: A lot of people wonder about, like you said, are online courses just a correspondence model? What kept it from being that for you?

Aileen: We had a lot of class interaction. We did class chats. I didn't like chats as much as the bulletin boards. Basically, we had a bulletin board where we would post our ideas. It wasn't like I was all alone doing this. There were other people in my classes. They just weren't anywhere near me, but there were other people who were taking the classes with me. And, so that's really what made it less like a correspondence class and more like a real class because there were other people and we were doing things together. In some of the classes, we actually did group projects together, which is kind of challenging when you're thousands of miles apart.

Kim noted that interaction with instructor and peers was constructed as part of the course design in such a way that people had little choice but to interact with one another:

Question: Did you interact with other people in the class a great deal?

Kim: Yes, actually we did. I was surprised. That was pretty much a requirement by every instructor that we had a group and you had to get together and chat once a week or complete projects and

communicate however you had to communicate to get that project completed.

Question: Was that a good thing?

Kim: I think it would be very easy for a lot of people to sit at home and do all of their work by themselves and not interact with different people, especially in the online environment, so forcing us to work as a group with different personalities and using technology was very beneficial. I use a lot of the technology now to interact through email and that sort of thing, to organize people, do projects, so, again, it was just kind of a real world experience. That's really how things are done now.

Meira had experienced all types of instruction as she completed her education. She took classes in the traditional correspondence model, face-to-face courses on a traditional college campus, and online courses while completing her master's degree. Here is her description of each modality:

Correspondence model of distance education:

In the old model of distance education, I was sent a manual, I completed readings, and I took tests that were mailed to me over long distances. It was a very, very slow process. There was little, if any, interaction with the instructor. I didn't contact them, and there wasn't email at that time.

Face-to-face classes:

In the face-to-face classes, I would get frustrated with instructors who read the textbook to me. They just go through and they're telling you what's already in the textbook. To me, that's not teaching. To me, that's reading the textbook, and I'm supposed to have already done that myself. Online, the instructors respected what we needed, and I didn't feel that in the face-to-face environment.

Online classes:

In the online classes, we had interaction at the level we needed. We could email questions to the instructor. When you ask a question, you get a response back. I liked the fact that we interacted with others in a group. I learned a lot from my peers. It has made a huge difference in the success of distance education because students can feel part of a class. In the online class, you interact virtually but not face-to-face. I'm the kind of learner who doesn't need a lot of interaction; however, in the online classroom, I was more inclined to participate. I had more time to think through responses. Some students are more reluctant to participate in the face-to-face classroom. In online classes, we were required to interact, and this encouraged people to participate who wouldn't normally participate in a face-to-face class because they were not confident in the content area or they felt others were smarter. Because students were required to demonstrate their knowledge, the online class led to more confidence. In chat, the person with the fastest fingers would contribute the most. Sometimes, we'd go off topic, off on a

tangent. The instructor had to bring people back. Sometimes it was confusing. I like the message boards – there was good use of the discussion boards. I think you spend more time in an online class than you do in a face-to-face class when you consider all the time you spend thinking, preparing, and posting. I also got a lot more out of it.

Stella favored synchronous chat activities because they promoted a feeling of connectedness to others in the class:

Stella: And, the thing about the online master's program was that the classes were synchronous, which actually, I think, seemed to contribute a lot to the experience. I'm really glad that they did it that way. I've had, since then in my doctoral program, last spring, I took a class that was part of an asynchronous online program, and it was fine, and I learned what I needed to learn, but it was interesting to contrast that to my master's experience. And, I didn't feel as connected, and I missed out on the kind of discussion and debate that we would have sometimes in our synchronous classes. Classes in my master's program were scheduled in the evenings for American students, but for me it meant a two-hour seminar from one to three in the morning, three to five in the morning, or two to six in the morning due to my location in the foreign country. So, I would have to schedule my sleeping, and I was working full time, so a lot of times I would have to go visit a client out of town in the morning, and so I would try to go to bed early and

get a few hours sleep. I was already a morning person, but that turned me into a “need very little sleep in general” person.

Question: When you said it was synchronous, that meant, I’m assuming that meant chat?

Stella: Yes, actual chat. They went through different software packages, and there were some technical barriers at the time because it was still early in the development, and the software was buggy, so a couple or three times we might not manage to have class or be delayed.

Question: That’s interesting. I’m kind of gathering here that in spite of these barriers of technical difficulties and time difference that you still feel that synchronous component was very important for melding together this community of learners.

Stella: Yes, yes, I really do. It was, and I will be the first to say it wasn’t convenient, but I’m the poster child for having it be inconvenient, so I have very little sympathy, I guess you might say, in some ways, for those people who are crying to the university about the synchronous.

Question: There are more and more people saying, “I signed up for online because I didn’t want to be at a certain place at a certain time.”

Stella: Right. In our program, we had another person in Europe, and we had working professionals, and we had people who often traveled on business, so, you know, they might not be at their office or home but in some hotel, but they did what they could.

Question: But, you know, that simulation of the closest thing to being in a face-to-face class. Did you feel that that sort of infused an excitement into the conversation, the learning?

Stella: It did. When it was done well, yes. But, I think, not all of the professors really knew how to use this effectively. There was a disparity in their skill at using this. For example, one professor tried to lecture. (laugh) It was terrible. This particular professor didn't really understand that you can't lecture the entire time. There is nothing worse than sitting in front of your computer at three o'clock in the morning and waiting for someone to finish a paragraph of a lecture. But, most of the professors didn't.

Regina suggested she could easily have been a totally independent learner, but the interaction required by the instructor promoted camaraderie in the course:

I could have done my whole online [program] without having a group session, without being in a project together. But, I did have to do a project with a couple of other ladies, and that was a lot of fun because we communicated with one another. And, we decided we were going to put our picture in our project. And, that was really good because you were able to communicate with people at a distance, either chatting or whatever method. I think you still have to have that connection with other people. I think those are challenges that when institutions are going to broaden the opportunities for people, those are challenges and barriers that they have to learn to overcome so that people feel connected to the

group. Or, maybe, have an accountability partner so that they stay focused, and they don't just drift off and decide, "I didn't like this. This didn't work for me."

When asked how the personality of the instructor and students is transmitted in the online environment, Lauren suggested there are ways to convey emotions even when typing:

Question: How is it that the personality goes through the online? How is that?

Lauren: Well, you've got to be careful, I think, because when you just read something, I may type you something that I meant one way and you read it and think, "Huh. Well." So, we used a lot of the emoticons or "Ha-ha" in parenthesis or Laugh Out Loud (LOL), those kinds of things, to make sure people knew it was a joke.

Lauren attended the commencement for her master's degree, and following the ceremony, an administrator of the university drilled her with questions about her online experience. Lauren described her conversation with the inquisitive administrator:

Question: How could you talk to each other?

Lauren: Well, we did talk to each other online. We sent messages to each other.

Question: Well, how did you know them?

Lauren: Well, I don't know what they look like, but I do know these people just from the classroom.

Lauren went on to explain that while attending an educational conference, she read the name tag of the person sitting next to her and realized the woman was in

her online class. Although the woman lived in another town, Lauren said they have remained in contact with one another.

Adah was in a program that required a three hour chat each week, and she explained how that allowed her, a social learner, to converse freely with her classmates:

Adah: I don't know if it was the people running the program, or people within the university who felt for it to be "real," you know a real class, you have to be "in class" at some point...yeah, like a night class. So, we had one three-hour class on Monday night or Thursday night every week. And, you just sat in front of the computer. The professor was moderating, and you prepared material to talk about. And, we had discussion just like you did in class. . . . And, so, you know, I could be carrying on three conversations at the same time. Yes, that whisper thing. I loved that. I'd be talking to one person about this and another person about this. And, of course, none of them would know I was talking with the others, and, you know, it would be completely different conversations about completely different things. And me being a very social person, I liked that, you know, it was fun. And, I could still keep up with what was going on in class, but I got to know them.

Question: That was my question. Did you feel like you got to know them?

Adah: Yeah, in that sort of way. It was probably like camp, you know. It is only a surface level, but you're really getting to know people. But, at

the same time, it's kind of an intensive thing where there is a certain level you really get to know these people fairly well in that particular sphere. And so, you know, I did.

Alex valued the asynchronous discussion board because it gave her an opportunity to refine her answer and say exactly what she meant. The instructor would post a question, divide the class into groups, and require them to answer the responses of other people. She described the structure of the class discussion:

Question: What did you value the absolute most in the online environment? And what is the most valuable thing that you look back and say, "That really made it a good experience?"

Alex: There was one area that I really liked, and that was the message boards.

Question: That was the discussion type?

Alex: Yes. Now, even though the chat was wonderful, it was somewhat limiting, as far as thought process. I loved my professors who would post a question – in fact one of them divided us into three or four groups where there were like five of us – relating to whatever it was we were studying at that time to get our feedback how it related to our lives. And, I could tell one of the instructors had done this quite a bit because on each question he had a "required" number of answers. And, I loved that because you had to respond to the question, and then he made you respond to two different questions and give feedback on

those, or give insightful opinions. That was not always easy to do. I really made me think. And, I even found myself going back and re-reading the text, and doing extra research, because I didn't understand something that someone else had posted. Or somebody would give a reference, and I would go reference what they had quoted.

In addition to connections to instructors and peers, there were also important connections established between the participants and others associated with the online program. Program advisors, thesis advisors, and, in one case, the program administrative assistant made the connection for the student. For Paige, it was critical to have a person available to answer questions. "It is important to have a 'bridge' person to help you." She added that although faculty were helpful and approachable, having a non-academic contact allowed her to ask questions without "feeling stupid" or feeling as though she was a "bother to the professor." Paige volunteered that she participated in this study because she received information that referenced the bridge person's name.

Paige: Your using her name was one of the reasons why I was happy to help you out because she was really helpful. She was that bridge person, and I think that when you are looking at having a program like this, it is extremely important to have support staff who are people people, you know, who are going to work with doing things that need to be done, whether it's arranging that the bookstore sends the right books or that a professor who doesn't happen to be around gets the message, or, you name it, she really was keeping the program going when I was

there, as far as being a liaison, because you didn't feel like you were bothering a professor with a problem. You had somebody you could go to. It's kind of like a nurse in a hospital. You know, they're there all the time, you can ask them anything, and you're not concerned so much about any ramifications tied to you showing that maybe you're inept or you're stupid or, you know, you didn't realize something or you're late on something. And, you know, there was that kind of bridge going on there with her that was really important, I felt, having that support person. Not that the faculty were unapproachable because they were all wonderful, too.

Question: Now that was different from your program advisor?

Paige: Technically, I didn't have a specific program advisor when I was in the program. I had a person who kind of facilitated my entry into the program. He was a member of the faculty, and I think he was just basically replying to email inquiries about the program. And, then I just worked with individual faculty members as I was going through the different classes. I didn't really have a faculty advisor, so to speak. I picked a thesis advisor fairly early in the process, and he was more, I guess, what you'd call a faculty academic advisor, or whatever, for the rest of the program, and a good one, and we've remained friends. Whenever he comes through here, he'll stop and visit and things like that.

Stella also felt there was a staff person who was instrumental in supporting her in the online program. She explained how important this person was in keeping her informed as well as serving as a liaison between student and faculty member at times:

Question: Did you feel that in the online program there was a bridge person like one instructor that you identified with or one program advisor, or just anyone that you felt kept you in touch, kept you from falling out, if something traumatic happened, or if you have a question, you felt free to ask that question or notify that person of something; whereas, you might not have felt comfortable with anyone else. They kept you connected.

Stella: Right. I would definitely say the connecting person in this program was the program secretary.

Question: Really?

Stella: Yes. She was amazing. She made sure everybody was abreast of things that were going on, and she made herself very available to answer any kind of question, not just administrative questions, but anything. If we had a problem, she would know who needed to be notified, and she would notify them herself. I don't think the program would make it without her. She was definitely, and continues to be, the heart and soul of the program, and, as always, wants to hear from former students. She's still a dear friend of mine.

Question: How critical was this contact person to the whole program?

Stella: Absolutely fundamental. The program staff is central; they are the ones that know how to get things done, and online students especially, because you're far away, it is really more important than it is in a brick and mortar institution to have somebody warm and helpful and very responsive and knowledgeable about all kinds of aspects that you feel you can ask a stupid question and not think, "Oh God, now this person is going to think I'm an idiot and is going to react to my work differently."

Question: That's an important point. So, knowing that they're not grading you, you feel more open.

Stella: Right. If you don't understand something really basic about how the technology works or whatever kind of question that you might have, you don't have to worry about the effect of the impression you made on somebody who has that kind of power over your career.

For Alex, the program advisor was critical to her success in the online program. Alex admired his dedication. "He explained concepts and held my hand virtually by email," she said, and she found this to be much more personal than her previous educational experience. "In my face-to-face undergraduate experience, some instructors wouldn't give me the time of day." Alex described this connection to her advisor:

Question: Did you feel connected to the other people in the class?

Alex: I felt connected to the program advisor, who was also one of my instructors. And, there was one other teacher. I felt connected to those

two people. My advisor was there every time I had a question, every time I had a problem, every time I just needed a pat on the back, and the times that . . . I wanted a real critique. Because I was going to send that project – I did something for a client, as a project – and I was about to send it to him. And, I wanted a real opinion, not just a mushy opinion. I wanted some hard truth, and he came through. So, I was more connected to him. I admired his dedication. I really did. Some of the professors – even though they were very nice and very informative and had all the wonderful little toys with the video conferencing and all of that – they were not as personable and as interested in my success as was my advisor. My advisor was extremely interested. He wanted to see all of us succeed. . . . on some of the concepts, he explained them to me over and over and he held my hand – online, email-wise – when I was panicked over taking that exit test. And, you know, he could have just blown me off. You know, he had a full class load, a lot of other people. I was just one. He went that extra mile, or he did with me. But, I'm sure he did with everybody else, too. He was just that kind of person. I can't say he returned every email within an hour, but within a day or two he was prompt. His answers were never short; they were always well thought out. He always referred me to the people that I needed, or gave me suggestions as to where to find research. When I was way off track,

he would gently push me in the right direction without ridiculing me. And, you know, even in the chat, he was very good about that – listening to all opinions and even if your opinion was way off base and you realized that, as you read them, you know, when you're chatting, sometimes you say things, or you haven't put it in the right perspective. You know, he was always respectful. And, I didn't find that all the time with professors.

Cara described a similar relationship with her thesis advisors:

I very much valued the way my thesis advisors made me feel special. My advisors were very supportive at all phases of my thesis work. I sometimes questioned the value of my work, but they never did waiver on the significance of the results of my research. Conducting the research did help me have the confidence that I now have to deal with people.

Flexibility. All of the participants in this study who were parents unanimously emphasized that online education allowed them the flexibility they needed to balance their role of parent with those of student and employee. Time with their children was paramount to these women, and they emphasized the master's degree would have been postponed had it not been offered online simply because they would not have taken time away from their children to complete an advanced degree. Martha elaborated:

With the online degree, I was there with my kids. I got to be with my kids. I didn't have to choose who I was spending my time with. I was with my kids after school. I did homework at night, after they were in bed, or they went and had a

special day with Dad or Grandma or something, while I worked on school work on the weekends. So, it took away a lot of having to choose.

Aileen, a single parent, indicated the flexibility of the online environment was critical to her pursuit of a master's degree:

You know, there were times that I was not available for my kid because I was doing class work. But I was still there. And if she really truly needed me, I could have stopped doing what I was doing. But there were times, there were times when we had class chats and she would want attention, and I would have to say, "Not now. I'm right in the middle of this class." But I could still talk to her and interact with her while I was doing my course work. And that made it very positive in that way. It may not be possible to balance life and family and work; we have to make sacrifices for both. It is not worth it to sacrifice home life – my child – for a job. Balancing is doable with an online degree.

In addition to being a single parent, Aileen also had the responsibility of caring for her mother who was in a near fatal car accident just after Aileen began the master's degree. "I would have had to drop out of a face-to-face program," Aileen said.

Regina had a full time job, a husband, and two children to consider when she entered the online degree program:

I did not have to be away from my family. I did not have to be in a classroom with other people. I could schedule to work on my lessons late at night, when I had done my "mother thing" and my "wife thing," and whatever my church

activities were. I could manage my degree on my own schedule. I could do it on the weekends. I could do it when it was convenient for me, and I liked that.

Cara had a daughter in middle school at the time she entered the online program, but she valued being able to complete the course work in her home environment. Lauren was able to complete course work both in her office and at home when necessary:

I was able to use my office at school and use that computer if I needed to, and my break room at school if I needed a faster connection, because I had dial-up at home. I was able to do whatever I needed to do with the kids if they had extracurricular events, things to go to, and then go home and work until midnight.

The flexibility of the online learning fit well into Gillian's schedule: "I get up at 4:00 a.m. anyway, and that fit in perfectly with the online process. I decided I never want to be back in a face-to-face classroom."

Although balancing the online program was sometimes difficult, Marion was able to balance the addition of a third child while working full time and completing the master's degree:

In looking back, it was a very difficult time. I had two young children; during that degree process I had a third child. And so, I not only was working full time, going to school, but I also had a child, and nobody in my school knew it online because they didn't know I was pregnant. And so, it didn't even figure into the equation of, "Is she going to finish? Is she not going to finish? How is this child going to hurt her?" It didn't even phase them because they had no idea, and I

continued to operate as if nothing had changed in my life. Because most of the classes were scheduled in the evenings, and usually later in the evenings, I wouldn't have to affect my family time. And, I think my kids were young enough that they didn't know to expect anything different. It just became part of our lifestyle and nothing they could really resent or rebel against because they really hadn't known it any other way. That's just the way life is.

Yet, Alex discovered there was greater flexibility in the online mode of learning than she had ever imagined:

I learned about being able to do things remotely. We splurged and took a cruise one January. We saved all year long, and we splurged. Unfortunately, my class started the day before we left, and I was panicked. I was absolutely panicked about this. It was like, "Oh, my gosh, how am I going to get my class?" and "How am I going to do this?" And, my husband was like, "They have computer terminals on the ship. We'll figure it out." He brought the laptop, just in case, with everything we needed. We hooked me up. I went to my classes remotely. He sat there, and he would bring me a drink, and I would be typing in my little chat space. Interestingly enough . . . after having that experience . . . we set up our business to be remote, just like that class was. What a huge opportunity. Next year, we are planning on spending a month in Europe and running our business remotely. I would never have dreamed you could do that. That's under the "neat stuff." Talk about an opportunity.

Greater Diversity. By engaging students from many areas of the world with different perspectives in a single learning environment, the online degree provided a broader, more diverse learning opportunity than those available to these women in traditional classes on the campuses of local community colleges and universities. Paige described the representation of people from in her online classes:

We had people from all over the world taking these classes, and they were these small groups, you know, of six or seven people, and our personalities would come through, and we'd tease each other and everything else in these online chats.

Marion explained how the diversity of her peers in the online classes added to her learning experience:

I've met, technically met, people in my courses that I developed friendships with and developed professional contacts with other people. And, because I was in a rural area, very divorced from people practicing the kinds of things that I practiced or enjoying the kinds of things I enjoyed, the degree and the learning opportunities provided a community of learners that helped me stay connected in a way that I couldn't have professionally had I not pursued the degree. It gave me a community of people that I could talk to, and I couldn't otherwise.

Diana noted, "There is only so much you can learn in the classroom. Online, the world is at my fingertips." Adah valued the input from her global classmates:

I enjoyed the interaction online. I found the participants in many ways very stimulating. In my classes, and this varied from class to class, but generally about

the same group of people coming in and out, there was a girl who was American but married to a man overseas and who lived in a foreign country. There was a guy who worked for the ambassador to the European Union. There was a guy in the Air Force who was stationed several places, I think in Utah mainly while we were in class. There was a missionary of some ilk, I'm not sure what denomination, but he was in South Africa. I found that so stimulating. I mean, the perspectives were so different . . . and I'm very fascinated by the whole dynamic. And it just brought a really interesting flavor that I think is magnificent in education. I think, you know, one of the great things about education is exposing yourself to the ideas of others and then figuring out how that then works into either your knowledge or belief systems. . . . So, you're talking about how to communicate with different public, and to have that was just, to me, better. I do believe that my experience in grad school definitely was better as a result of being online because of the exposure I had to different people.

Safe Learning Environment. Adult learners value a safe learning environment in which “design of the learning tasks, the atmosphere in the room, and the very design of small groups and materials convey to the adult learners that this experience will work for them. The context is safe” (Vella, 2002, p. 8). Furthermore, Vella (2002) explained:

Realization that the environment is nonjudgmental assures safety. Affirmation of every offering from every learner, as well as lavish affirmation of efforts and products of learning tasks, can create a sense of safety that invites creativity and

spontaneity in dealing with new concepts, skills, and attitudes. Affirming is one of the basic tasks of every teacher. (p. 10)

Kim, as previously described, dropped out of a face-to-face master's degree program after her contributions to the class were openly challenged by a strong personality in the classroom. Shortly after leaving the traditional program, Kim discovered an online program in her field of study. She enrolled and found the environment in the online classes to be less hostile. During an interview, she described her impression of the online environment:

Question: How was the online environment itself conducive to supporting your learning?

Kim: People, when they are doing email, tend to think about what they write, they use little faces, so when someone is commenting or criticized, they are not aggressive or territorial; they are trying to help you learn better or point out a flaw.

Question: So, to you it is a safer environment?

Kim: It's a safer environment, and it can be done at any time. Which for me is a blessing. I tend to get going greater in the afternoon, so I could get online and learn much more than if I had to be sitting in a class.

Question: Would you have earned your master's degree had it not been offered online?

Kim: That's a really tough question. I would have had to move again. No, I would not have done that.

Denise acknowledged that some people need traditional face-to-face classes, but in the online environment she found she could avoid people who would typically dominate class discussions. She described the perceived benefit:

Actually, the benefit of the online courses, it's much easier to ignore somebody who is annoying. I mean, you figure out who the annoying people are, and you just pretty much can ignore them. But, when you're sitting in the classroom with that kind of person...I mean, you've been there before. It's like they raise their hand to ask a question, and you're just like, "Oh, no. Here we go again." You know. So, to me, that was a benefit, not having to suffer through.

Diana related an incident that occurred recently in her face-to-face doctoral program as an example of why she preferred the online environment. Diana gave a presentation to her class and cited research to support her stance, but when she concluded her presentation, the instructor "turned to a row of men in the classroom and said, 'Now what was wrong with that? That is a woman's viewpoint, and women are emotional. It's a woman thing.'" Diana was stunned. She vowed at that moment not to contribute her thoughts again in front of the class. If that had occurred in an online environment, she explained, she would have "immediately typed in a list of studies that supported me in what I had said," thereby giving her an opportunity to confront the challenge to her views in a less threatening environment. Diana sighed audibly and said, "I have cried all the way home because of the hurtful things they've said" in the face-to-face class.

Meira, who has taken classes in the correspondence model of distance education, the traditional model of face-to-face education, and online education, described the online environment as one that promotes equity:

Everyone is on an equal playing field. I didn't feel we were judged differently. I can see that some students might be intimidated in the face-to-face environment if you have a group that is very over-bearing and over-vocal in their opinions. Some faculty in the face-to-face environment will say nothing. I would shy away from becoming involved in a conversation in that environment. I avoid confrontation. Discussion doesn't have to mean confrontation. It is a lot less confrontational in an online setting – that may be a definite benefit.

Taylor said there was less risk in the online environment when she wanted to contribute:

It can be safe to take a risk. It is the instructor's responsibility to make it a safe environment to take an academic, educational risk. And, it's safer online because if they say something, you don't have to respond. If they don't like your idea, maybe they just won't respond at all.

Lauren described herself as shy, and she recalled how an instructor in her undergraduate degree had embarrassed her in the face-to-face classroom:

Question: Had you ever been confronted in a face-to-face classroom with some attitudes that made you uncomfortable?

Lauren: In my bachelor's degree, yes, and even professor attitudes. I remember an elective I took in my bachelor's degree. I had to do a presentation and get ready, and the professor said, "Now she is

painfully shy, so you be careful.” And, I thought, “Well, I can’t do it now.” I was okay until he announced that to the class, and I just thought, “Don’t they know, or don’t they think, that that just made you painfully shy whether you were or not?” And, that didn’t happen online. I liked it a lot better.

Alex found that even if negative comments were made in the online environment, the environment seemed to temper the effect:

Alex: One thing I found about online learning is even if you’re feed-backing negatively – and we did have some negative ones – you know emotion is in there to an extent, but it’s not like a face-to-face conflict. It’s almost more civilized because, you know, tempers aren’t flaring as bad. Now, some people did get their feelings hurt. And, it smarted. But, the professor said, “You take it as constructive. They don’t know you. Think about what they said. Agree or disagree, but take it as constructive.” And, I thought that was a really neat concept.

Question: Sort of to agree to disagree?

Alex: You know you can agree with somebody, or you could disagree with what they said. But this is not a black and white subject. You know, this could be a theoretical question, theoretical answers. There is no right or wrong. Everybody had an opinion, and everybody’s opinion mattered.

Adah felt the online degree offered a safer environment that was free from many of the stereotypes and prejudices that are part of the traditional classroom:

You know, you had none of the barriers you often have in communicating with others. All you had was the knowledge and what you could say. And, unlike what online communication has come from a social point of view, where there are people pretending to be people they're not, and that kind of thing, in this case there was really no need to. There was no need for that. Either you know what you're talking about, or you don't know what you're talking about. It's pretty obvious pretty quickly. And it's much more obvious when you type something out. Once you type it, they can refer back. It's right there. And even when you type something, then you say, "That's really stupid." Anyway, I loved getting to know those people for who they were. I didn't know what they looked like. I didn't know how old they were. I didn't know, and that, to me, was socially very stimulating and interesting and fun. And, I loved that aspect of it.

Paige, who described herself as shy and preferring written to spoken communication, said she flourished in the online environment where "all judgments are left behind. You are left with pure 'mind-to-mind' communication."

Anonymity. Some of the participants in this study viewed anonymity as a decided advantage of the online environment. Marion, an African-American woman, valued a learning environment where her race was not a factor in dealing with others. Marion described her view of an anonymous online environment:

Being in an online environment where race and color did not figure into the equation at all was very important, and I think it did change dramatically the kind of response that I got not only from my peers but also from my professors who had no idea who or what I was or what I looked like. Until I went for my defense, which I had to do in a face-to-face environment, one of my professor's told me at my defense that he thought I was a blond-haired Caucasian woman. And, where he got this picture from, and whether that's a good picture or a bad picture was really interesting. I was going, "Okay, what does that mean?" But, I had never tried to reveal and kept that hidden because I didn't want that to color, in any way, anybody's interactions with me, and probably to this day there are some students that have no clue that I'm African-American, and it makes no difference to them because they interacted with me based on what I had to offer in the class and my intellect versus what I look like. And, so, it was a tremendously freeing environment to be as intellectually challenging, and as challenged, as I wanted to be, and to call people on things and not have them say, "Well, you're just saying that because you're Black," or "You're just saying that because you're a woman." They could actually look at the arguments and analyze them based on the fact that they're argument. I think it made a difference in how I was perceived in the classroom. Could I pinpoint it? Could I say my grades were different as a result? No, I can't, but I know because my voice is ethnically neutral, I guess you could say, that I've been able to open doors for myself, and I've been able to do things that I wouldn't have been able to do had I met

somebody face-to-face, and it's a shame that that still operates even today in 2006, but people unconsciously make choices and decisions, and if you ask them consciously they'll deny it until they're blue in the face, but it does still happen.

Although anonymity was not at the forefront of Stella's considerations, she noted there were times she observed a classmate's nationality become a factor:

Question: Was anonymity important in your online program, or was it not a factor for you?

Stella: That's actually something that I've often reflected on because in my case it was irrelevant. It's sad to say I'm your basic white, middle class kind of indiscriminate European origin person, so I never really thought about it, but it has come up a lot of times in other people's interactions. There was this guy from Spain who was in some of my classes, and his name was obviously a foreign name. So, I think a couple of times, in classes he had not been in before, they were surprised by his name, and I think it changed their opinion of him in some ways, even though he was male, but still, there are all kinds of stereotypes one has to fight.

Question: In what way did their attitude change?

Stella: Their attitude changed because I noticed, for example, both of us had the same time zone issues, and we were one of the groups in the summer class that was very much in communication, and we had to, as a class, complete a group project. And, they would say something

about him wanting to sleep late, “You guys go to bed really late and then sleep half the day away,” and these kinds of comments, and I’m not even sure to what extent these people knew anything about his culture, but definitely there were comments of the kind about laziness. They knew that I was an American even though I lived in a foreign country. So, I guess maybe that’s why they didn’t say anything to me.

Question: What if he had kept that to himself? What if he had not divulged where he lived?

Stella: I don’t know. I don’t know if it would have been entirely possible because even though his English was terrific, he would generally make non-native type statements, so, it’s not as equally hidden as race. I mean race can be completely transparent, unless someone says something. But with nationality, there are clues. I mean, he could have said he was from somewhere else. I don’t know if he had said he was German, I wonder, you know, if the kinds of things would have been the same. He might have made the exact same comments, but would they have reacted the same way? I kind of suspect not, but I can’t say.

Paige discussed online learning against the backdrop of multimedia such as audio and video, and how this might affect the anonymity of the online class environment:

Paige: I don’t know how much we’re going to have to worry about this discussion-based online education. I think there are more advances

with broadband and things like that where, you know, where it will be more video, and it'll be peer-to-peer kind of video, and we'll all be able to see each other.

Question: What's driving that? Does that leave writers out again? What's driving that?

Paige: I don't like it. I mean, I don't think it's going to...I didn't need to see the faces of the people when I was taking the online class. As I mentioned before, I think it would take something out of it. It removed some of the baggage, as I said before, to not know what everybody looked like. I liked that, but that's maybe my personality type, too, and the fact that it's actually an advantage for me. Oh, I guess I'm not ugly or anything, but I felt like it was an advantage that we weren't all looking at each other face-to-face and that I didn't have that blonde impression for me, the preconceived, the things that we bring to the image.

Alex said emphatically, "I definitely wanted anonymity. . . . One of the best things about online learning is that you don't have to worry about what people think. It would be a great disservice to have video where everyone could be seen." Alex explained that in her experience, there were times she took a test at midnight, and she would not have wanted to be seen by members of the class. "We're here to learn. The whole point is to take self-consciousness out of it. That's one of the beauties of distance education. Not having a

picture freed me up to be me.” On the other hand, anonymity was valued by Martha for a totally different reason:

There are a variety of reasons why people choose this over traditional education.

I had my third child during the program. No one in the program had to know this.

I had morning sickness, but no one knew.

Shyness was less noticeable and more easily overcome in the online environment. Kim related her feelings:

Question: I’m looking at my questions. How about anonymity, Kim? How important was the anonymity in the online environment to you?

Kim: It was actually pretty important. It gave me a lot of courage sometimes to come out with some new ideas, to contradict what people were saying. Yeah, I don’t know that I would have done that in a classroom setting, even before I had the bad classroom experience. Anonymity kind of gives you a lot of courage to say things that you want to say. So, I feel I said things in peer conversations and discussions for people to think about.

Question: So, you think you said things online that you might not have said in the face-to-face classroom?

Kim: Yes.

Lauren described how anonymity in the online environment actually promoted her participation in the class:

Being behind that computer screen where I couldn't be seen, I had a lot more, I guess, courage to speak up and say, "No, I don't think so. I think we should do it this way." Whereas, in a classroom, I may never have said anything because they would have all looked at me, you know, and I would have felt on display or something or that they would think, "Oh, that's stupid." But, on the computer, they might have read that and thought, "Oh, that's stupid," but I didn't know it.

Lauren also described the experience of a classmate who needed the anonymity of the online environment because she was self-conscious about her weight:

There was someone in one of my classes who was extremely heavy and always felt discriminated against, and felt that when people saw her they thought she was stupid because she was fat. And, she said, online she didn't have that at all because people didn't know.

Belle shared a very personal and painful reason for never wanting to put a picture of herself in an online class:

Belle: I think that a lot of the classes that I've been involved in, either instructing or taking, have had some sort of introductory period, and required an introduction where you either had to tell about yourself, some of them have a picture you can post online. I can put a picture of myself up there, but I choose not to. I had skin cancer two years ago and had surgery on my face. And, if I don't have to put up a picture somewhere, I don't.

Question: I would never have known that.

Belle: I know, and most people don't. I do because to me it was a very big ordeal. But, most people would have no clue. It's one of those things.

Sometimes I look at the picture and go, "Maybe you can't see it."

Cara related that in her degree program, so much information was shared on personal web sites about the identity of each student that anonymity was not a factor. Each person in the program was required to share his or her name, biographical information related to family and work, and a photograph. Aileen, a white, middle class female in her 30s, admitted that anonymity had not entered her mind when she enrolled in the online master's degree program, nor was it an issue for her while she completed the program, but, after considering the question, she suggested that the instructors in her online program would have been flexible on the issue:

Aileen: One of the first requirements in each class was we had to create a personal home page with a picture and a blurb...everyone had to put up a bio. Now, granted, you could certainly make up something, but I didn't really get the impression that anybody was lying. I made up one and posted it for every class I had, but I didn't really feel it was anonymous because we did have to post information about ourselves.

Question: Let's say your race. I had one participant, and no one knew her race. It was extremely important to her, and she was anonymous, as far as her race. No pictures. And, that was extremely valuable to her in her mind and her soul that she didn't have to reveal that.

Aileen: That's interesting. I had never considered that. That never occurred to me, you know. Now that I think about it, I think it said, "Post a photo of yourself." But, you know, if I had emailed the professor and said, "I'm not really comfortable posting my photo on the Internet, can I post a photo of something, you know, reflective of who I am? Like, oh, mountains, or something? I can't imagine any of the professors I had saying, "No, you have to post a picture of yourself," if I had raised a concern. It never occurred to me.

Meira was another participant who had not considered anonymity prior to the interview for this study, but as she thought about the question, she reflected out loud about how this could be an important consideration for others:

Question: How important was anonymity, in any way, in the course?

Meira: It never really crossed my mind, but I know that physical appearance makes a huge impression on people and how they interact with you. If you stop to think, you probably have people of different ethnic backgrounds and people who are 50 years old who don't want to be in a classroom with 35-year-old students. I'm thinking also that someone who maybe has a stutter or physical disability, or impairment, could easily participate in these online courses without have that be a factor. Gender was equaled out; there were more females than males in the classes. In the online environment, I didn't find that cliquishness; we all were equals.

Engaged Learning. The learning in the online environment was, for some of the women in this study, more thought-provoking, more engaging, and more personalized than learning they had encountered in the traditional classroom setting. Dedra explained why the online environment proved to be advantageous for her:

I'm a very introverted kind of person, so I don't really need to have a lot of people around me to become energized. I don't need to sit in a classroom with my buddies. That doesn't enhance the learning experience for me or make it easier for me to learn. And, in fact, it can be really annoying if you sit there and, you know, I've had to take continuing ed courses for different things, and you, know, you go on Tuesday and you sit there from four to eight, and it's just that, can you sit there for that many hours? That's what it comes down to, do you get bleacher butt? Can you sit there in that desk for that long, and then go home? And so, for me, it was if the learning context, or the sitting context, was much more favorable to me online. It was a very peaceful setting to be there in my empty classroom. You know, I'd gotten some dinner, I had me a little glass of water there, or whatever, and the things I needed to look at, and it was quiet, and everything was just right there, and there weren't any distractions, and I could focus on what was happening. Online learning was just such a brand new experience that it had to be looked at in and of itself, learning that way. So, it was important for me to put together how does learning this way, what are the parallels between it and learning the way I've always learned? And, there were some, but there were many that were completely different and made it more

rewarding, which I think was what kept me going. If it had been less rewarding, I wouldn't have, probably.

Taylor related how she garnered more self-confidence from the online degree because she had to construct learning to fit her own situation:

Getting the degree gave me self-confidence because it is not handed to you. You don't go to class and hear something and regurgitate it on a test. You're given ideas and thoughts, and you're out there researching and finding it all out yourself. And, you're formulating your own ideas and how to use those ideas in real-life situations. So, being able to do all of that, in my opinion, makes you a stronger leader.

Aileen found that the online degree prompted her to become acquainted with library resources that were both online as well as in physical libraries in her vicinity:

Aileen: That was the most time I have ever spent in a library. I never . . . I got my entire undergraduate degree . . . I'm an underachiever. I never read a book. I never went to the library, ever. Orientation weekend, they showed us the library. And, I might have cut through it once in the rain. But, other than that I never went to the library. I started this degree, and I read everything, and I went to the library lots. It was really funny.

Question: Online, right?

Aileen: Yes. Well, no, I actually went physically to the library for the class. And there was one thing we were supposed to find archived in

microfilm. I found the actual book, you know, this hundred year old book at the Science and Engineering Library down the street from my house. So, you know, it was kind of interesting. I really enjoyed that class. He would give us tasks that were like solving little mysteries: find this, find that. It was like being a detective. That class was a whole lot of fun. I used the stuff I learned in that class throughout the program because it was basically how to find the information you need. And, I've used that class ever since, where to go and look for things.

Meira had a similar experience; she explored the text and online materials and spent a great deal of time reflecting on how the information could be applied to her own career path:

Going and sitting in a classroom and being there doesn't mean you are learning. In the online classes, you have to read materials and teach yourself the materials. In the face-to-face classroom, you go and sit. In the virtual environment, you must understand the materials. I think distance learning is much more constructivist in nature. In the face-to-face classroom, students are responding to the instructor. In online classes, there is more opportunity to shape your own learning. I was able to take the materials and pursue my own areas and create things relevant to my own area. I was able to tailor the degree.

Alex compared the impact of the online degree to her previous years of education:

I think I would have gotten a lot more out of my undergrad if I had learned it in this environment, in the online environment. I'm sure knowing 500 genus species names of birds is important, but I don't remember them now. But I sure do remember the concepts that I learned in my online classes. And, I don't know if it was just because we did projects with them, or applied them, or if it was because I wanted to learn. I enjoyed learning this way, and it made me want to learn more.

Professional Development

The women in this study had many opportunities come their way as a result of earning their degrees, and most of the opportunities were beyond their expectations. In retrospect the women realized the online degree provided them the qualifications and confidence needed to seize unexpected opportunities. They were, indeed, better positioned to capitalize on professional development opportunities not previously available to them. For many, newly gained skills paved the way for new career opportunities, connectedness in a professional community, credibility among peers which resulted in a sense of belonging in their professional community.

New Career Opportunities. Adah completed her online program while enduring nine months of all-day sickness in her pregnancy. After graduating, she was offered a teaching position at a local university:

In my case, my whole professional life changed as a result of it. It wasn't like I was sitting in class and had this moment in class...it wasn't that kind of moment

where I went, “Oh, I want to teach.” But because I had the degree, I could say, “I’ll do that.” Then I had my moment where, “Now, this is the greatest thing I’ve ever done. I love this. How can I do this more?” And, as it happened, in my particular case, there would be opportunity where now I am in a full time position. It was gradual. I have been everything you can be. I’ve been adjunct. I’ve been half time. I’ve been three-quarter time. I’ve been full time. But if I had not gone ahead and had that master’s degree, I mean obviously in academics that’s the minimum requirement for teaching on the college level. The most important outcome of the degree is that it enabled my career. I have a job I could not have gotten without the degree, and I have a degree I could not have gotten if it had not been offered online.

Stella won two awards for her thesis and a top paper award at a conference. It was like a dream, she said, when a respondent in one of the conference sessions asked for Stella’s permission to include a chapter from her thesis in the book he was authoring. That opened the door for Stella and a member of her master’s thesis committee, who is now her doctoral advisor, to co-author a book based on Stella’s thesis. Stella said confidently, “I think that my work speaks for itself in that sense, and I can say this is the thesis that I wrote during my online program, as a result of my online program.”

Six months after earning her degree, Cara was offered a job that didn’t exist at the time she started the online program: “I got this job, and it is perfect for me. I have a full time income now rather than part time. I get to do a professional, exciting job at home most of the time.”

Taylor was emphatic that earning the online master's degree had changed her life. Having a master's degree allowed her to earn a principal certification, and that made her eligible to be selected from a pool of 98 applicants as the assistant principal at a local elementary school. Taylor said her non-traditional approach to education benefited her when applying for the assistant principal position:

Just the experience of getting an online degree opened up new relationships, new opportunities, and a new position. I have done things that aren't traditional; they saw that. I couldn't have qualified for any of it without the online degree.

Alex's job with the city where she lived was one targeted for a pay scale reduction. "That was the moment I realized I had to do something," Alex said. With the support of her husband, Alex earned the degree and thereby earned the skills she needed to join her husband in their home-based business of designing Web sites and Web-based materials. Alex described this new opportunity and how it has affected her life: "I have my own niche in the company. I went from designing basic Web sites to interactive online Web sites to video work, both educational and commercial, because I learned these techniques in my program."

Lauren was within one semester of completing her online master's degree when she was hired for a new position in another town. She attributed her success in being qualified and chosen for the position directly to the master's degree. And, by coincidence one of the people who interviewed Lauren happened to be someone she had grown to be friends with in the online program. Lauren had known this person for two years in the graduate program and had no idea they might one day work together. It

wasn't until Lauren was interviewed for the new position that she learned this person would be working with her.

Belle experienced a similar career opportunity that resulted from earning the online degree and finding that someone on the interview team was a classmate in the online degree program:

In one of my master's classes, I was paired up with a group of people in the class for interaction. About a year later, when I interviewed for a new position, I found out that one of the people interviewing me had been in the online interaction group. It was really wild to meet someone online who six months to a year later became my boss! I had never met him before the interview. The program did help me get the job. Opportunities and channels have opened up to things I would not have thought possible. I plan now to sign up in an online program for principal certification and do that this year.

Belle also teaches courses online for a commercial company in addition to working full time at a school district. "Teaching online has been an opportunity that has definitely come my way as a result of getting the online master's degree," she added.

Earning the online degree led to Martha's promotion in her job at a school district:

I was able to move into a different position within my first year in the district. No one questioned the degree. They very quickly saw my work, my research, and knew I was doing good work. Doors opened immediately. I don't think they would have let me walk into that position without the degree.

Connectedness in a Professional Community. In addition to the positive outcomes associated with career opportunities, some participants experienced a growing sense of connectedness with those in their professional areas. Dedra felt for the first time she had met others in her profession who truly understood some of the frustrations she had experienced in dealing with educational technology in the public school setting:

Question: You really talk a lot about competence that you know, you felt challenged and you felt yourself becoming more competent as a result of that.

Dedra And connectedness, too, because those people were having the same frustrating experiences I was. Because, where I was, there was somebody in the middle school, and there was somebody in the upper school, and they were doing minimal largely because their teachers wouldn't cooperate with them at all, but, so there was nobody else who had my experience, and those people did. And so I knew I wasn't alone, I knew I wasn't wrong, they were finding the same things frustrating that I did. I wasn't the one who was off the mark and imagining things were wrong that were perfectly fine, they knew it too, and that was extremely important to me was that I knew there were people out there, and I knew who they were. I mean, not just somebody out there must understand, I knew people who understood my situation. Those frustrations would come through in comments that people would make about their administrators.

Cara realized after graduating that being in an online program with a network of people around the country, and maintaining email contact with those people, has made her a valuable resource in her job.

I was able to set up a meeting with one of the chief people in the national organization in Washington, D.C., because I had made contact through my advisor. I was able to write to this man in Washington and tell him that I was the first graduate of the online program. I later learned he had worked with my advisor to get a partnership going between the national organization and the university, and because I could say that I was in the program with my advisor, the contact in Washington replied immediately to my email and said, “Yes, I want to meet with you.”

Because the use of email was so familiar to everyone in Cara’s class, she is now able to continue contacting her peers in her new professional role:

We’re so used to communicating by email that I just readily wrote to them and told them about my new job and asked some of them if maybe I could come out to visit and tell them about it, and I started getting responses back from them. So, yes, we’ve done everything through email, pretty much. Now, I’ll call a few of them if I’m actually going to their location, and I’ll get a phone conversation, too. Definitely, we’re just so comfortable by email.

Belle found herself part of a much larger network of professionals after earning the online degree. She described this outgrowth of the degree:

In the online master's program, I had interaction with professors and a connection with people that I never had in my undergraduate experience. I am constantly seeking to upgrade my skills. I am constantly on the lookout for resources, and I like to share them. This has given me an opportunity to feel like I've connected, I've impacted education in some way. Knowing people beyond the walls of my own school gave me a much broader perspective of the world, of what is happening to education, and of funding resources online.

Martha said she is now "sharing with other people in the field. It is nice to share ideas. I still email and communicate with people in the program about how to integrate technology into curriculum and lessons."

Credibility Among Peers. Denise held a job as director of distance learning at a rural community college. She wanted to stay competitive in a technology-related profession that was changing rapidly. She earned credibility among instructors at her institution because she earned her master's degree online:

I'm a product of distance education. I've been there. I've done that. I know what it's like from a student perspective. So I felt like that, again, would be another validating factor with me in working with faculty. Instead of coming in and trying to tell them how to do an online course, and it's like, "Well, she doesn't know what she's talking about," I can say, "Hey, I got my whole degree that way."

Martha gained credibility at work: "Within my work, I feel like I am more respected, and my opinion counts more because I have a higher degree. I don't know if it's just me that

perceives it that way, or if it really is.” The added credibility that Lauren gained benefited teachers and students: “I have a little more status now. Other people call and ask my opinion or advice. I am able to reinvest learning back into others. I pass knowledge on to teachers so they can pass it on to students.” Meira also found that others sought her expertise after she earned the degree: “I earned a little bit more respect; others acknowledge the value of earning a master’s. Definitely, this is the case in the workplace. Others see me as more of an expert on different topics.”

Adah viewed the master’s degree as both an opportunity to build on prior knowledge and as a way to earn credibility. “I knew there was a lot I was learning from it, but at the same time I was looking at it as something to have credibility with others, more so than ““Oh, I don’t know anything about this and I have to learn it.”” The master’s degree helped Kim better relate to her co-workers:

I believe people respected me for not only my passion for what I was doing, but also then working and taking the steps for getting a higher education. Part of my education I would come in, and I would share something that I knew might interest my co-workers and supervisors or ask them questions, and so really most of the people that I worked with really knew what I was going through, and so I felt like they were rooting for me. It was a very positive experience, and it made a difference in the fact that they knew I wasn’t just there to collect a pay check, so I think I got promoted pretty quickly. My supervisors have gone out of their way to make sure I am challenged.

Marion was teaching college classes while earning her online degree. She gained credibility with her students when she shared with them what she was learning and the challenge of balancing many roles in her life:

My students were very aware that while I was teaching them I was also learning as well, and so they were very encouraging knowing that I had homework just like I gave them homework, that I had tests just like I gave them tests, and papers to write, and things like that, that I was doing the very same things that they were doing. And, so, they were very sympathetic to that effort and very encouraging. I encouraged them to be diligent and to push through whatever kinds of obstacles that might have tried to get in the way of them pursuing a degree. I said, “If I can teach, if I can go to school long distance, if I can have a family and a marriage, if I can get through deaths in my family, etc., those are the kinds of things that you can push through as well to make sure that you complete the degree.” So, it made me very credible as a mentor and a teacher in my students’ eyes. As I completed it, they saw that it was something that was attainable, that they could do. So, yes, my relationship with my students changed as they saw me achieving, completing this master’s degree.

Regina felt the online degree increased the trust that others had in her:

If I am going to teach someone, they have to realize that I have the skills and the knowledge, or they’re not going to think that what I say is valid. So, you have to have that trust factor. That they know they can trust you, and you have taken the

time to learn the skills that they need. Therefore, when you gain that trust, then you gain the opportunity to teach them something they didn't have before.

Paige, as a result of the online master's degree, has established global research-based relationships. She explained how this was an outcrop of the degree:

Question: Has your perspective of the world changed as a result of earning the online degree?

Paige: I'm traveling more because of my work at the university and because of my research, and I'm meeting more people and opening my mind to those . . . to a more global approach in that regard. The degree led to the fact that I'm doing this kind of research. And, in this research, I am building friendships in other countries because I need to get their input for the research I'm doing. And, I've joined research groups and other groups that are international in scope, and so I have friends on listservs and things like that. And, of course, in the online degree program I met people all over the world who were also getting the same degree.

Question: Could you see yourself doing that if you were still in the position you held prior to earning the degree?

Paige: No. No. I mean, I wouldn't be as connected, I don't think, and as worldly, because tied to my profession, especially tied to my research, are trips and relationships that I have built with people on a global

basis. So, it was the career change that caused that, and then just the connectedness of the Internet that has allowed me to do that.

Personal Development

In addition, there was considerable emphasis by some study participants on meaningful personal development that went beyond acquisition of course related knowledge, skills, and credentials. These changes included increased self-respect and self-confidence and an inner strength to be a role model for their children. The self-confidence led to heightened sensitivity to their capability for constructing knowledge. Whether or not others noticed their new-found “sense of knowing” (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 15), these women realized new capabilities within themselves that changed the way they looked at life. Rogers (1961) suggested self-direction is seen in a person when he or she does the following:

1. moves toward being autonomous.
2. becomes responsible for himself or herself.
3. decides what activities and ways of behaving have meaning for him and which do not.

(pp. 170 – 171)

Self-respect and Confidence. Lauren entered the master’s program with doubts about her own capabilities as a student - doubts that began with a ninth grade algebra teacher. Repeatedly, the teacher would address the class and say, “Algebra is something you guys can do. You girls won’t be able to do it.” Over and over he repeated that

mantra to the class, Lauren said, until she believed it and made the first C of her life. By earning the master's degree, Lauren proved to herself she could complete the program "in a timely manner and make good grades." She described the program as "stressful, challenging, and fun. It sounds funny, but that's the way I felt."

Regina's need to increase self-respect and self-confidence also originated in her high school years. She married at a very young age and left high school prior to graduation. That created a need to prove that she could successfully compete with her peers. She explained the motivation to prove herself by earning the degree:

I married at a very young age. I married at 16. I was still in school. I went to high school all the way up until the last six weeks of my senior year. And my husband, at the time, joined the service and we moved to Texas. And I missed that last six weeks. And I think that right there . . . I missed my graduation. Something that you've always looked forward to from the time you started school. I missed that. So I think because of that, the need I had never was fulfilled at that point. I think that has been kind of my motivation to continue my education, because that fulfills a need that I had that wasn't fulfilled as a young person, but I could fulfill as an older person. And I think because of that, it made me realize the importance of education and my desire to learn more. Because I knew what it was like to not finish something that you started. You start in the first grade and you want to finish. When you finish in the 12th grade, you finish a chapter in your life. And I didn't finish that. And so I think because of that, that helps with the motivation and self-satisfaction of knowing that I did this....So

there was something missing that I felt like I had not completed in my own personal life. Going back to school helped me fulfill that and made me feel like, okay, I'm doing something with my life. And, so I think personally, I have changed in the fact that, I can't really put it into words. I don't know how to define the word. But I know you need the word. Just the confidence. Knowing that I put myself in a position to advance, if I wanted to.

Meira described a surge in self-confidence after earning the online degree:

It increased my knowledge base, and I gained new skills. All of what I learned was useful to building skills to be more confident in the workplace. I can complete with people who are 20 years younger. I feel I have more to offer. I have greater confidence in my ability to do things I had been doing, and there is validation I was doing things the right way.

Cara admitted that she is proud of herself for earning the degree. She explained, "I feel I have a lot to offer. I have the confidence to deal with people on a higher level and the skills I need to do that." Martha said her confidence level "changed to fit what the world says you must have."

Aileen said she has become more confident in her job, and she received confirmation that the views she has about her professional practice are not radical. Aileen explained that her views are actually "much more mainstream than I thought they were. I'm much more in the forefront than I thought I was. I am much more confident of how to back up my espoused view with research." She has also found that "having the degree makes a difference with administrators."

Earning the online degree gave Marion a heightened sense of self-respect and “the right and ability to counsel others and say, ‘You can do it. The online master’s degree was a trajectory and a stepping stone to the Ph.D. I said to myself, ‘I did that [earned the master’s], so I can do that [earn the Ph.D.], too.’”

Belle realized tangible career opportunities by earning the degree, but she also gained confidence in herself as an educator “by putting myself in line with other people who were at a similar level to me and knowing that I could stand with them.” Alex found that the credibility she gained from the degree led to increased confidence:

I command a great deal of respect now, and not just because I like it. I am looked at differently when I’m dealing with the Ph.D.’s and these superintendents and these heads of corporations. Those three little letters behind there have some power. . . . All of a sudden, I had some credibility behind me. That was a big thing. You know, it was such a huge confidence booster. My husband had always been the computer genius, and I didn’t like that, being so far behind him. I was a science person. I was always so far behind him. I still am, in some aspects, but . . . I’ve got my little niche of the company here that is all me, and that’s a good feeling.

Kim not only developed greater confidence in her skills and felt that others respected her for getting an advanced degree, but she also described a change in her expectations of others:

Now, I have higher expectations of people that I work with. I have greater passion or desire to use the skills I have learned to help the community gain the

information they need. If a person I work with has the same passion for making the organization the best it can be, we are in agreement, but there is conflict with people just waiting for retirement.

Inner Strength to be a Role Model. Denise echoed the sentiments of many participants when she said, “The most important outcome of earning the online degree was the example set for my children.” Regina openly acknowledged her family as part of her motivation to earn the master’s degree: “I wanted to do it not only to help satisfy the need I had as a person, I wanted to be an inspiration to my children. That no matter what age you are, you continue to learn your whole life.”

Gillian wanted her daughters to learn from her persistence. “Their life’s their oyster, and hopefully they’ve seen that it can be because of me having the opportunities that I’ve had education-wise. So, I hope it’s had an impact on them.” Gillian smiled and told how her daughters encouraged her to earn the degree: “They are proud of me. They kept telling me, ‘Reach for your dreams, Mama, reach for your dreams.’”

Marion realized an education for herself was a contribution to her whole family, and she described the effect of her education:

My earning the master’s degree changed the viewpoints of my children. I became “learning mommy.” Whereas, before they thought when they got out of school of course they would go to college. Now, they think, “Oh, it’s not about just going to college. I might decide to pursue my master’s, or I might decide to go on and pursue a Ph.D.” And, so, the educational possibilities for my children have

opened tremendously as a result of them seeing me as a student, as a mother, as a teacher and a professional being able to do those things, as well.

Martha wanted to show her children that education is important, that learning never stops, and it is a life-long endeavor. “My kids have grown up with mommy being in school; they know learning never stops,” she said. “Graduation is not the end. Education is something that is never done; it is continuous throughout your life.”

Taylor described how her education had defined her identity within her family and for her children:

My children don't know any difference. Mom has always been in school. Their picture of mom is with a graduation cap and gown. I'm not the domestic goddess person. My mom's emphasis was on our education. My mom didn't have a college education, but my father did. My mom always felt trapped. I expect my children to get degrees. I paid for my degrees myself. My son realized how hard I worked to get an education. He has seen the financial differences in our lives, and he has made comments that education pays. Education is just a part of our life...period, end of story. And, I'm still a good mom. My husband does a lot of cooking and a lot of cleaning. We all pitch in and do that. I think every person, every woman, has to make her own decisions. And, if they're on one end of that spectrum or the other, you have to do what's right for you and the kids.

Belle moved the computer into the living room of her home so she could remain in close contact with her family and respond to them if they needed her. She explained:

Women do feel the primary responsibility for the family. We just do. It comes from our culture and the societal view of who is head of the household and the main wage earner. I hope my children see that I am a continual learner.

Alex wanted to serve as a role model for her children, but she was motivated by their support for her while she did her course work in the home:

I had very small children. You know, it was really nice. My family was a big motivator. When I had my evening chats, they made it their point to be quiet. They were just very supportive. They kept me going. You know, I was about to drop one of the classes because I just couldn't take it. And, it was like, I'll pick it up in the summer semester. And, my husband was like, "No, you won't. You tell me what you need, and we'll do it." And sure enough, he was a big motivator. Contrary to what people think, online degrees are not just a cake walk. They're not anywhere near a cake walk. They are still tough to get.

Cara spent a great deal of time at the computer, which took time away from her daughter. On the other hand, Cara modeled behavior for her 16-year-old daughter. Cara described how her pursuit of the online degree affected her daughter:

She was able to see how that I have this great job. I hope it will help her to think about what she wants to do with her life. It is great for women and girls to think about what they will do and not just get married right away. I would like her to start thinking, "Hmmm, I want to find a job that I'm going to be happy with," rather than wait, like her mom is 45, and then find something that she likes. I would just like her to say, "You know, I want to think about what kind of job I'd

be happy in, that I'd feel good about," instead of just making money. So I think, hopefully, she will see that she's got to find something – I hope, first – that she wants to do something with her life before she decides to get married.

Lauren had immediate evidence that earning the degree benefited her adult daughter, and she explained:

It helped my children. When my daughter's supervisor learned that both of her parents had degrees, it changed his attitude toward her. He helped her get into an office job because of his perception of her. She now wants to get a degree. Seeing her mom helped her.

Despite resistance from her own family, Paige chose to seek a master's degree online with the conviction that she would not take away from her family in doing so but would endow them with a quality of life that they would not have had otherwise. She rebutted any notion that her family had suffered as a result of her earning the degree:

And, you know, how did this hurt my family? Well, it didn't at all. My husband continues to be getting promotions and raises, and he loves his work. My son just graduated in the top 20 of his class of 240 from high school here, and my daughter is at the top of her fifth grade class, and I think both of my children benefit from my advanced degree and my level of education every day because I bring that home with me. They see me working on it; they help me with my work. My daughter comes to the library with me in the summer when I'm doing my research; my son has helped to actually do some of the research, and so I believe that being a mother with a master's degree makes me a better mother.

And, so, kind of in your face to my mom and dad and husband who were sitting there saying, “You don’t really want to get a master’s degree, do you? Isn’t that just bogus? Why would you do that?” I think that just the level of reading materials in our house and everything else, so much has changed over when I was working at my previous job. And, of course, I got into a profession where I have a flexible time schedule, too. I’m not having to just go and work these ten hour days, five days a week, you know, most of the days of the year. I am working all the time; my husband is on my case because I’m working nights and weekends, but it’s flexible work, right, so I can spend the time with my family when I want to and I need to, so that’s nice.

The Impact on Others

Another theme noted by participants was the evidence of the impact on other people as a result of their having earned the online degree. There was a domino effect of other people seeking higher education as a result of the participant earning the online degree. Several shared that by earning an online degree they became role models for other family members or acquaintances who, seeing their success, decided to enroll in an online program. In addition, for some who participated in this study, relationships with others changed or were clarified as a result of earning the online degree.

The Domino Effect of Earning an Online Degree. Some of the participants in this study were quick to point out that an unforeseen result of their earning the online degree was, in the words of Taylor, a “domino effect” whereby other members of their family or

other acquaintances saw the positive outcome of earning an online degree in the life of the participant and subsequently decided to also pursue a degree online. Taylor explained:

I have found that it's a domino effect if one woman stands up and does it. When they see that you are a working mom, and you finished, and you survived, and, yes, I color the gray in my hair, but you know, and then they see the job you get, and they see that the stress is over. I think it's a domino effect, at least it has been from where I sit. My husband was skeptical until I finished. Now he is getting his degree online. And even my mom went back to college for a little bit, and then when her parents got sick she had to stay home. And, my sister-in-law went back and got a nursing degree.

Aileen found the same domino effect occurred in her family after she began her online degree:

Question: Did you feel like you had support from your family for this?

Aileen: Oh yeah. We lived with my mom at the time and she was so supportive. A year after I started, she thought, you know maybe getting a master's degree online isn't such a bad idea. And she's doing an online master's in reading.

Question: Oh, that is amazing. Because of you?

Aileen: Because of me doing it. Yeah. I told her, "Let's see what they've got. Let's see what programs they have that you might be interested in." So she is getting her master's in reading.

Question: So she is a teacher.

Aileen: She is a teacher. Actually, she is a special education teacher. So she is getting her master's in reading because that is the program they had online, and she is enjoying it.

Martha described her sister, who is dyslexic, as someone who didn't like school and chose to enter the job market immediately following high school. However, as Martha completed the online master's degree, her sister decided she would take online courses. After taking several online courses and building her confidence, Martha's sister transferred to an on-campus program and was, at the time of the interview with Martha, about to graduate with a degree in forensic science and criminal justice. Martha said of her sister, "She saw there was a different way and that she could do it."

Relationship Changes. There was a determination about Taylor that I didn't understand until near the end of our interview. It was then Taylor shared how her parents were "toxic" to her, causing her to live with other family members and friends during her high school years. Taylor's father was an alcoholic, and she said her parents divorced just as she finished high school and was accepted into a prestigious university in the south. At that time, her parents informed her they couldn't pay for her to go to college. Taylor gave up her dream of attending the prestigious university and went instead to a local junior college where an advisor helped Taylor get numerous scholarships and grants so that she didn't have to pay for her first 60 hours of college. Taylor described how earning the online master's degree changed her relationship with her mother:

Question: Did the degrees you earned make a wider fissure between you and your mother, or did she ultimately come to accept the fact that you were different from her?

Taylor: Ultimately, when I got my master's, when I got that degree, it just sunk in with her. She was happy that I got my bachelor's, but she wasn't proud that I did it. But, when I got my master's, she was proud. And so it has closed the gap in a lot of ways. It has closed the gap.

Question: Does that equip you to better deal with the parents and the kids in education?

Taylor: I think so. I think my personal experiences, although they may not have been what I would have chosen, have made me what I am today, and they help me do what I want to do.

Lauren noticed that her relationship changed with some of the people in her community as a result of earning an advanced degree and getting a new job in a neighboring town. Some of the people in her community treated her with contempt.

Lauren recalled:

A school board member made a comment to me one day that "since you got your degree, you're too good for us." More than one person – all males – on the school board, made a comment. Sometimes in smaller towns, when somebody betters themselves, instead of being happy for them, people are critical. Certain

cultures don't want you to do better because they feel they lose you. I got that for awhile.

Aileen, the single parent of a 9-year-old daughter, struggled to obtain her master's degree while caring for her mother who had been in a near-fatal automobile accident. Although school work was demanding for Aileen, her daughter did not resent the time Aileen spent on school work. Aileen explained, "I did a lot of my course work while my daughter was in an all-day Saturday music class. She is more accepting now of me getting a [doctorate] degree." Aileen explained how the online degree allowed her to devote time to her daughter at the same time she completed the master's degree, so her daughter has no objections to Aileen applying for acceptance into an online doctoral program. At the time of our interview, Aileen was waiting to hear the results of her application.

Double Standard for Women

On a less optimistic note, another theme emerged as several participants related personally having experienced in their occupations the double standard set for women in terms of promotion and advancement. Participants were asked to respond to a quote from Noe's (2002) book, *Employee Training and Development*, which reads, "Men get evaluated based on their potential, women based on their performance" (p. 348). Clearly, the responses of participants to this quote and the experiences they had had in the workplace indicated women must still prove they are more competent and have greater knowledge and skills than men – in other words, they must out-perform men - in order to

compete professionally (Bierema, 2001; Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Cunningham, 2006; Euben, 2001; Jarrell & Stanley, 2004; Marschke et al., 2007; Martin, 2000; Maume, 2004; Noe, 2002). The exceptions were participants in female-dominated professions or women from a totally different culture, and these participants admitted they had little understanding of the challenges encountered by most women in terms of gender bias and the subsequent effect on promotion and advancement. Whitmarsh et al. (2007), in a study of influences on women's career choices, noted similar results:

Women in female-dominated careers did not cite any notable obstacles in their career paths. In striking contrast, the women in gender-neutral careers reported frequent and surprising barriers. . . . These women indicated that they were not given the skills early in their careers to effectively manage workplace issues such as negotiating a promotion or dealing with sexual harassment. (p. 231)

In addition, Whitmarsh et al. (2007) pointed out:

The women who transitioned from one career to another launched their initial career in a female-dominated career field (e.g., teacher, secretary, paralegal) immediately after college or before completion of college. With encouragement from spouses, parents, and mentors, these women continued their education, embarking on a new phase in their professional lives by transitioning into a gender-neutral career. This pattern suggested that as these women enhanced their self-awareness, self-efficacy, and understanding of the world of work, they gained the confidence to launch a new career venture. One participant stated that as she successfully satisfied her responsibilities as a paralegal and observed

lawyers in the firm, she began to realize that she had the cognitive skills and abilities to be successful as an attorney. Another participant, working as a learning disabilities consultant, was encouraged by her mentor to complete her Ph.D. so she could obtain a faculty position to train learning disabilities professionals. The pattern of change of the women in female-dominated careers was quite different and was characterized by intracareer change. (pp. 231-232)

Women Still Face Discrimination. For most of the women in this study, the reality of workplace discrimination was vivid and real. They had personal, and often painful, examples to substantiate their first-hand experience with the necessity to prove their expertise in order to advance. They found that having superior credentials did not protect them from gender discrimination. To begin, consider Lauren, who worked in a school district and earned her online degree without the administrators being aware that she was doing so. During her last semester in the master's program, Lauren was offered, and accepted, a position in a neighboring town which provided her a \$6,000 raise. She explained that the school district hired a man to replace her. He didn't have a master's degree or the same years of experience, yet his starting salary was more than Lauren would be making in her new job. Lauren described the conversation she had with a school administrator about this perceived inequity:

Lauren: During a return visit to the school district, I asked the superintendent why I didn't get that pay increase, and he replied, "Because you're a female." It was a slap in the face. He actually said that, "Because

you're a female." So I said, "You mean I'd never get that much?", and he said, "No."

Question: And he told you that?

Lauren: He told me that.

Question: That's illegal.

Lauren: But since I didn't work there any more, I guess he thought he could say that. But, he actually told me that.

Lauren added emphatically, "I had the master's, and the other guy didn't. I had more years experience than he did, but the one who replaced me got more money." Lauren went on to relate that a group of male coaches from the school district publicized widely that they were traveling to a nearby college to become school principals. Everyone knew their intent of becoming principals in the local school district, and it was assumed if a position became available, they would be considered. When Lauren was asked what the administration would say if a group of women announced that they were earning their principal certification and wanted to become principals, Lauren said the school administrators' response would be, "Where?" The assumption, she said, would be that the women would not be candidates for principal in the local district. "In some areas of the country, there are not many women administrators. They may serve as curriculum directors, counselors, or technology coordinators, but the majority of the 'real' administrator jobs are held by men." Lauren made this observation:

If a man does something athletic, it is celebrated. We're Friday night lights out there. Football and athletics have the highest overall budget in the school, then

band, and then academics. If a male and a female with the same qualifications apply for a job in the school districts I serve, generally the male gets the job.

Lauren also related that many times she offered ideas to her principal and superintendent, but it wasn't until they adopted her ideas as their own and announced the ideas at a meeting that any action was taken. The principal or superintendent would then turn to Lauren to implement the ideas. If positive outcomes resulted, the principal and the superintendent would take credit. Lauren ended by relating the story of the ascension of one man to principal in the school district where she had worked:

There was a man who is now principal. He was in an alternative certification program and was a special education teacher who taught three years when he became an elementary principal. Now, with only eight years total experience, he is a high school principal. He may become the superintendent soon. I don't think that would happen as a woman.

Belle responded to the quote by Noe (2002) with this comment:

It rings true based on everything that you see in our society. Women do feel a need to prove themselves, and sometimes, because of this, we get an image of the cut-throat female executive in the business world. From my own experience, I know there was a man brought into our school district with the intent of moving him up when a position became available. Would it have happened that way for a woman? Interesting.

Meira described her work environment as female-dominated, but she noted that in other departments at her university there was evidence of gender discrimination:

Question: I'm wondering since you said that there was a glass ceiling, to use your own words, if there was also ever a feeling that you had to have *more* credentials to show your capability of performance in order to compete, perhaps, with someone else who showed promise, potential.

Meira: Within our office, there were those who had their master's. The education shows you are an equal. Our office is female-based; there are only one or two males. We compete against each other for merit pay, directorships, but in the university as a whole, you can see there are males who are promoted based on potential rather than performance.

Cara entered a job that didn't even exist prior to earning her online master's degree, but in her search for a position, she found an incredible lack of willingness on the part of potential employers – men and women - to think outside the box for what she could do simply because she was a woman. Cara described the experience as follows:

People have no imagination for seeing the potential in a person . . . especially for women, I think. I think that men are looked at, probably, as they have done various things, "Oh, you've done a variety of things in your life, so you can do anything." Women, too, may be stuck in this, "A woman can only do certain things, and men can do anything."

Taylor and Martha, both in public education, echoed similar views on the double standard for women. Taylor shared her view:

Question: Noe said, “Men are promoted based on their potential, and women are promoted based on their performance.” How would you respond to that?

Taylor: I would agree. Even our superintendent has made the comment, “We need to get more men in here.” If a woman is being considered for a promotion, they would look at her past performance appraisals. A woman has to show what she can do.

Martha indicated gender inequities are obvious in the decisions for promotion to administrative positions in public education, and especially in elementary education. “There are so few men in elementary education that if a man shows an interest, he is eased into a position,” Martha observed.

Regina reflected on how things have improved, somewhat, for women, yet women still face tremendous challenges:

We’ve come a long way from the way things were back then. I’m pretty much a rebel. I would probably have been a rebel back then, and I don’t think I could have lived in the environment where they thought women . . . they degraded women. Women did not have a mind or a thought process, and their opinion was not valued at all. I think that women do have a place, and we’ve come a long way, but we have a long way to go. I think in a business sense, unfortunately, we don’t get the same pay as a man.

Paige described women's reticence to seek advancement, why women are often relegated to service rather than leadership positions, and the struggle of a female friend who chose to compete for a higher position in their university:

I think we can all relate to . . . the types of traditional roles of women where they are the nurses, and they are the secretaries, and you can even go down to the letterman's club at the high school, and you can see that the boy gets to be the president and the girl gets to be the recording secretary and see that happening. What has caused that, and how do we overcome that? I think because women are more attuned to people and not as attuned to, what do I want to say? Women are more attuned to human-to human, I think than men are, they're just more wired that way, and so they [women] sometimes stay at that level where they're providing service because they don't think that it's worth it to stick their neck out and put the kinds of effort into being the president and the leader that you have to do, the games that you have to play, the energy that you have to put into things that maybe don't seem as worthwhile, meetings that don't get anywhere because it's mostly men who are running the meetings. It's just that I think that it's very difficult to find a woman who is willing to bump up against the male-dominated power structure right now and have to go through all that's involved, even like playing golf, talking about the football game, that all these things that you're thinking, "Well what does this have to do with business?", but in the men's minds, it has a lot to do with business. And, that's how they work. And, so, if you're going to be the dean in charge of an academic area, you're suddenly

finding yourself having to go through all this stuff that does not appeal to you in any way and doesn't seem to you to further the goals. So, you'd rather be the associate dean or even just be a person who works in that area because the whole system is wired for men. And, overcoming that takes a woman who is willing to just be determined that it is not right and it needs to be overcome. And, with the kinds of pressures we have taking care of our families, and it's not just children, it's parents, it's care-givers, and we like that role, and it's an important role and we know it, and we're not going to give that up. When you're the care-giver, it's also hard to step into the power structure and perform in that power structure the way you need to without becoming extremely frustrated by it. I know that I would not want to step up to that level. We have a woman on our faculty who I basically helped mentor into being an associate dean in our school, and I thank her every day. I say, "There aren't very many people, and there aren't very many women, who would do this. And, I thank God every day that you're willing to step up, because I wouldn't. I just wouldn't do that. I just can't put up with the garbage that's involved with having to put up with that power structure." I admire her. I admire any woman who has risen to the top. I know what they are going through, and this is not to denigrate men in any way. They are what they are, and they're there, and I know a lot of men who are trying to help women, and a lot of men who are frustrated by the fact that women will not step up, but the way it's structured right now, it's very difficult and not very rewarding. And, I don't know how to overcome that, and I'm just amazed that we get as many

women as we do who are smart who are still willing to go through what they go through, especially at higher levels of power.

Other women in the study related experiences they had had in the work place. For example, Alex was involved in an automobile accident during her undergraduate education. She accrued large medical bills and was forced to go to work, and it was then she “found out it’s a big boy’s club in the work force.” She described her assessment of the double standards for women:

Yes, men are given so much more consideration, even if they don’t have the degree, than women are. Women also have to have a master’s degree to compete with a bachelor’s in a man. Just because in business – and I hate to say this, but this is the big stigma – when considered for promotion, you’re not just looked at based on your performance. You’re looked at where you are in life. Whether you’re married, whether you have children, whether you’re going to have to take off if the children are sick, whether there’s a possibility that you’re going to become pregnant, and whether you’re stable or you are single, and that’s not taken into consideration with a man. The women almost have to be better. Education makes a boost. My mother always told me that it doesn’t matter what you get your bachelor’s degree in, as long as you get it because it will show stability, it will show that you are able to stick to something, that you are able to follow through on something. I never realized how important that was for a woman, until I didn’t have it. But a man just has to be a man. I’m glad my husband isn’t here. You know, he has a bachelor’s and was always so much more

respected than I was. He has a bachelor's in business management and, you know, this is what got me. If they knew what his GPA was, they'd be talking to me. They wouldn't take business advice from him. [laughter] But, that's just not the way it is, and, that's a shame.

Alex added a note of encouragement that women “are working on equal payment. We are not there, but that is why we are getting an education. We are becoming more entrepreneurial.”

Adah, who now teaches at a private university situated on a campus of beautiful antebellum-style buildings, said her position as a full-time instructor was much more difficult for her to acquire than was her husband's teaching position at the same institution. “If I hadn't been able to prove I was excellent at what I do,” she said, “I'm not sure I would have been able to keep my position; whereas, my husband came in ABD, and it was assumed he would be good at the job he was given.” Adah felt she was fortunate to have had a female mentor, but she described her perspective of women in general:

Women don't affirm one another as much as they should. In general, women don't often support other women in their pursuit of having both a family and a career. Men aren't expected to choose, but women often are expected to leave one or the other behind.

Perspectives of Women in Female-Dominated Professions. Two of the women in this study did not identify with the concept of a glass ceiling or discrimination against women in the workplace either because they worked in a female-dominated environment

or they spent most of their working life in a culture outside this country. The perspectives of these women served to triangulate the views of the majority of women in the study. Examples of the outlying views regarding a double standard for women are found in these examples. Kim provided the first example:

Question: Within the whole realm of the world of work, I'm going to talk a little about the dynamics of men and women because in the online environment we know that the majority are women – online learners, the majority are women. And that is a statistic that can be backed up over and over again. And, right now I just recently heard on the radio that there are more women than men in higher education in general, and that's a statistic that's beginning to worry many people. To be specific, do you see this degree as having helped promote you in the workplace as a woman beyond a place that you might have gotten without the degree, and if so, how? And, then I'm going to give you a quote out of a book that sort of prompted this.

Kim: Do you want to give me the quote?

Question: I'll do that. I'll give you the quote. One of my textbooks in my doctorate program was by an author named Noe. And he wrote - and when I saw this quote it just jumped off the page at me and I've been intrigued by it ever since - he said men are promoted based on their potential; women are promoted based on their performance. In other words, women have to do more and do it better, possibly, to prove

their proficiency in order to be promoted where really and truly a man might be promoted just based on having some promise. Have you ever found that to be true in your profession, and did the online degree give you credibility that you needed to overcome that kind of situation?

Kim: In the world in which I work, I always have seen it dominated by women. Even when I was in high school I worked in the same kind of job, and there was not a man around. Our director was a woman, all of us . . . everybody was a woman, and every similar place I've worked at has been directed by a woman, and most of the men...have not been really in advisory roles.

Question: So, did the degree then, other than empowering you to understand the power of information, and since it wasn't a male to female dynamic, did it help you with a female to female dynamic in the workplace?

Kim: Yes. I believe people respected me for not only my passion for what I was doing, but also then working and taking the steps for getting a higher education and coming back I met a lot of my co-workers and supervisors. Part of my education I would come in and I would share something that I knew might interest them or ask them questions, and so really most of the people that I worked with really knew what I was going through and so I felt like they were rooting for me. It was a very positive experience, and it made a difference in the fact that they

knew I wasn't just there to collect a pay check, so I think I got promoted pretty quickly. My supervisors have gone out of their way to make sure I am challenged.

The second example was provided by Stella, who lived and worked as an American in a European country:

Question: Noe said that men are promoted based on their potential, and women are promoted based on their performance, and since you mentioned something about the word "gendered," I'll jump onto that and just ask you, did that have anything to do with why you got your degree, and how do you respond? It may or may not have; how would you respond to that particular quote?

Stella: It is an interesting quote. I spent almost all of my adult life in Europe. Now, I'm in academia. I'm not sure how accurate it [the quote] is. I kind of have a knee-jerk reaction against it. It seems a little discriminatory against men. I'm not sure about that. As far as how it plays in my own experience, the field I was going into was male dominated in the European country where I was living, but here in the U.S. it is mostly women. Now, I'm a doctoral student and feel I need the degree to be more confident in my career. And, sometimes I think, as a fellow Ph.D. student, you wonder sometimes exactly why you did this, right? And, you know, did you need some kind of external

validation? I mean, part of it is about the career, but the whole process in itself also does things.

Higher Education's Need for Change

Higher education's provision of online education was another theme evident in the interviews with the participants. When asked whether higher education was responding to the need for online education, most participants felt the response was not adequate. Some suggested higher education leaders actually created barriers to education to protect its elite status. The example given most often was that of denying women access to a Ph.D. by online delivery methods. Participants expressed there is a need for leaders in distance education who represent the interests of a growing population of non-traditional, adult learners, a majority of whom are women, entering higher education via online programs.

Avoid Barriers Created by Leadership in Higher Education. Women in this study voiced great concern over the failure of leaders in government and education to recognize the need for changes in education that would better serve Americans who are currently operating in a more competitive, global society. These women called for more power to be given to those who want to shape their own learning experiences. Examples of their views are as follows:

Paige: I think it is still that entrenched, traditional approach and the fact is that the people in the power structure don't see the need. They don't feel that it is necessary in any way. Now, the head of the State Higher

Education System spoke on campus and was talking about the need for more engineers, more physicists, and that we need to be doing something about that. Well, guess what? Why aren't we looking at doing more online education? Why aren't we trying to reach out to the people who are out there, who have the intellect to be able to master this material, and to transform their lives and become people who are important in these fields? But, they can't do it unless they can do it online. A lot of those people are women. A lot of them are women who could be getting into the sciences if there wasn't this expectation that you have to come and you have to sit in a classroom between the hours of eight and five, five days a week, for several years of your life. Why couldn't we make it flexible and make it approachable? I think that if we want to think about serving social needs, and we want to meet the demands of a future economy that we want to see here, addressing that is a big factor. I could really see using online education and having an initiative. Now, Bush, in his state of the union speech, was talking about pouring all this money into science. I don't know if they're looking at this as part of their initiative or not, just reaching out to the people who can't get the degree unless they have that flexibility of an online approach.

Question: There are underserved adults all around us who cannot come to the university. They might work nearby, but they really can't come right

here to sit in this class from eight to five. But, do you think the administrators care?

Paige: The college presidents are being judged by whether or not they can raise \$2 billion to build a new business school, and that's their legacy. It's something that they can point to over there, and it's got their name on it, see? Now, if you have 500 underserved adults who you can get into science degrees, you don't have anything to point to put your name on, do you? There's nothing there for you. I mean, you know, they can say, and when you read their biography or their obituary, you can see that they were the president when the business school, the football field, and the new library were all built. But, there's no way that you can accumulate, right now there isn't, this fact that this president led an initiative to allow, you know, thousands of underserved people to self-actualize, to get to a point where they could serve society even better and to lift themselves up and lift others up in different ways. That doesn't show on paper, does it?

Question: No, it doesn't, and it doesn't help them go and get that other job. I'm beginning to think that all of higher education is a stepping stone, so, therefore, there is no real, concrete, long-term planning for the future and helping, really helping, people in need because if it doesn't show up on paper, it's not going to help them . . . go to the next step to get the higher salary.

Paige: Look at the 5-year plans of most institutions, and what they are talking about is building things, building more buildings, building a better football team, because athletics are so important, and that's male driven things. I mean, I don't really know that if women were in charge if that would always be happening. I think there are some women who would base their self-worth on whether or not they built a bunch of buildings on a campus as a president, but I think there would be a lot more of them who would be inclined to think that building the lives of people who can influence people would be the most important thing.

Question: Do you think . . . if there were more women as administrators and decision makers of distance education, do you think that would make a difference?

Paige: They would still have to answer to the administrators who decide whether they are going to be funding things. The administrators who are the vice presidents . . . and the presidents of the universities, the people who decide ultimately are men. They're the men who care about whether we gave out enough scholarships for the football team to win a lot of games, they're the men who want to build the buildings and maybe even build the endowment, but not build up people. They'll say that's the goal of their institution and then pour all the money into the athletics and building some buildings and then

building on all the maintenance costs for all those buildings, and I don't know. Helping people doesn't seem to be right up at the top of the priority list.

Similarly, as the online degree helped Dedra see innumerable possibilities for improvement in her professional area, she experienced the refusal of administrators to make improvements. She watched them make classic errors in judgment about technology, focusing more on the technology itself rather than what the technology could do for students. Dedra explained her concern:

The world is flat, and educators haven't caught onto that, yet. It's all about power because what I was doing with my teachers was bottom up, "This is what we want to do; we're hitting this ceiling . . . we're hitting all these things," but administration from the top down was saying, "We've already decided what you need to have, and where it needs to be, and when you need to have access to it, so don't bother us all with these subordinate questions." It was a hundred percent power.

Dedra added that individuals are now competing one-on-one because of powerful global communications, and online learning makes education more market driven and more available to people around the globe. This is often perceived by leaders at institutions as a threat rather than an opportunity for expanding access:

Obviously online learning is subversive in that it gets around the power structure. And so, the more prevalent that becomes, in other words the more free you are to go wherever you need to be or learn whatever you need to learn puts a little bit of

pressure, perhaps, on institutions at whatever level to really look at what they do and see if they are providing what people want. And, if they're not, their numbers are not going to be there. Not only do students have the options of going anywhere, but institutions have the option of getting students from anywhere. So, it increases the opportunity rather than limiting it, it seems to me.

Failure by those in leadership in higher education to recognize dramatically different learners leads to the creation of institutional barriers in higher education. Regina described a group of learners who have not typically been the focus of higher education institutions:

It is very important for educational institutions to realize that they're not just targeting the high school kids that aren't married. They're targeting business people. They're targeting women in general who have lots of demands on their time. The life of a person who is older . . . a woman who is older that is coming back to education, her focus is totally different than a high schooler. She's had those life experiences. I had those life experiences, and I knew the importance of education, and I was there to learn. Whereas, these kids right out of high school, they don't have an idea of what they're going to be, what they're going to do. They're just there because that's the next step in their life. . . . As an older student, you're there to learn. And, you have a purpose in mind, and you have a goal. You have a goal that you set for yourself, and you're going to achieve that goal. And, I think you become two different types of learners at that point: the student who sits there because they don't know what they want, and then the

older woman or student who is there because they have a purpose to learn and to better themselves. And that's why they're there. They're not there because somebody else is paying for it; they're paying for the degree.

Another need for change in higher education may be a culture of resistance to utilization and adoption of online education among faculty members. Stella gave as an example a discussion on a national listserv of higher education faculty hosted by a prestigious university. A discussion that caught her attention was focused on the question of whether online degrees were equal in breadth and rigor to those offered in the traditional classroom. Stella related exchanges generated by faculty on this topic through the listserv:

There was a really interesting discussion about online education at the beginning of the summer, and it extended for a while. And, it's really fascinating the things, the opinions, professors in the various fields hold across the United States, and in some cases abroad, but mostly in the United States, and some of them . . . solely dismissing online degree programs as inferior, generally speaking, or as useful only if there is no other alternative available, and others were saying, "Is it really the medium of delivery that determines the quality of the degree, or is it the quality of the instruction and the work and the grading and everything that goes into a degree, in general? To what extent, basically, does the medium matter?" That's pretty much how I feel. I mean I don't think that . . . I think if you have good professors who are working with good material, know their stuff, who are

capable of teaching, yes there are certain adaptations in the form that they need to make, but the work's the work.

Expand Access to Higher Education. These women asked for increased access to higher education, greater flexibility in educational offerings, and commitment by higher education to support expansion of online degree programs. Belle began by describing society's need to provide education to more students:

As a society, we are trying to provide all students an opportunity to go to college. The legislature is requiring school districts to offer up to 30 hours of college credits prior to high school graduation. But, colleges have a limited number of classrooms and instructors; they can't squeeze anyone else onto the campuses. Through online education, they can open up more classes for people who can't get there. Universities are slow to offer online classes because they may not understand distance learning. A lot of educators still see the virtual high school or online learning at the college level as an unknown. Universities aren't keeping up with the demand.

Denise, a distance education administrator in higher education, said in her experience, upper administrators in higher education are not utilizing distance education technology to address overcrowding and limited resources. She recommended better utilization of existing buildings and classrooms by increasing the use of online resources for the delivery of instruction, and she described the situation at her institution:

We've just pretty much completed . . . I mean, we have remodeled, touched, almost every building on campus, and now they're saying we still don't have any

classrooms left. I said, “Well, you know, I guess we do more distance learning.” And, they just kind of looked at me, and I said, “Or hybrid courses. You do a hybrid course and you’re freeing up that half of the classroom space to do another hybrid course, so you can do twice as many courses in a class at the same time.” So, I don’t know that administration thinks in those terms, yet, but I think they have seen the writing on the wall that there is definitely a market out there for distance education.

Meira suggested without increased online opportunities, higher education will become as exclusionary as it was years ago when only the wealthy could afford an education:

There is nothing to indicate that brick and mortar institutions are going to go away, but they are becoming so cost prohibitive that many students are not going to be able to afford to go to college, and we’re going to go back to where we were 30 years ago where only your elite, your financially well-off people could afford to go to school. And, is that what we want our society to turn into? Where we only educate those who have the money to be able to afford it? And, that’s what will happen if the costs keep becoming so prohibitive. So, there’s got to be some trade-offs here. We’ve got to look at the whole issue, I think of distance education, because I think that it’s something that now with the Internet capacity and all of the things we can do with the Internet, it’s something that they [higher education institutions] really need to be offering quite a bit more so that more students can get the education that they want.

Dedra suggested there are two keys for the lock to open access to higher education: universities need to recognize that there is another population of students out there to be served, and participants need to jump into online learning. The outcomes “will be just fascinating,” she said. “If knowledge is power, we have the power to share knowledge with a lot of people who haven’t had it before.” For institutions of higher education, Dedra said, “this isn’t a threat; it’s an opportunity!”

Gillian discovered another barrier within higher education - bias against a degree earned by online education rather than the traditional form of education:

I think it [distance education] is creating new biases right now. What people don’t understand creates bias. It’s as simple as that. Anything new is going to have bias somewhere, and if you’re open-minded enough to know that going into it, then you deal with it step by step. The academy is not wanting to give up the old systems. Distance education should not replace brick and mortar campuses. Higher education needs to offer more individual continuing education classes, not just full programs. They need to offer skills-based courses, not just theory-based courses and program. They need to make registration easier to get into individual classes. Financial aid needs to be creative. The promotion and tenure process should give credit for online course conversion.

Marion asked for an understanding of the needs of a non-traditional student:

Question: What would you say to higher education if you could get a message across to them about this opportunity for more women?

Marion: Universities and colleges have finally recognized that there is no traditional student, that there are students who are coming to the college environment out of high school, there are students who are coming to the college environment out of work situations, there are students who are coming with families, there are students who are coming without families, but that there really is this myth of the traditional student. Very few schools, I think, hold to the asynchronous model where you learn at your own pace. They are still stuck on that academic semester schedule, but I think they are going to evolve and move in that direction in some way, shape, or form, or other entities are offering that kind of asynchronous education where you do it at your own pace, and you complete it at your own pace, and when you get done, you get done.

Martha said something very similar when asked about the need to expand online education:

Question: Do you think our educators should be expanding online programs for the very reason that women need this? Is that a legitimate enough reason?

Martha: Yes, I think so. I think it's coming around. Like I say, when I first started, it was very limited as to what degree you could even earn online and what colleges offered it, and now, most of your major universities offer several different programs. It's been established that

you can get the same type of education, the same quality of education online as what you can get in a face-to-face situation. So, just continue to broaden it so that you can earn your degree in almost anything.

Diana was a woman who completed the online master's degree but could not find an online doctoral program in her field. She began commuting to an institution to complete a Ph.D., and her fears about the driving each week were quickly confirmed: "I can't stand it – the driving. I have begged the people in the doctorate to put more online." Diana asked why the university felt they could not put more of the program online, and she said they gave the reasons below:

- They want me to deal with people as part of the training to become a superintendent
- They feel the discussions – stories from experts in educational administration – are best delivered face-to-face
- People still have trouble with technology
- Lack of knowledge

Diana said these may be valid concerns, but she also suggested there are valid reasons why educators should be trained to utilize online resources:

If I am going to be a superintendent, I must be resourceful. I think I am resourceful. It does me no good to be resourceful if the information I need is not available. People are very resistant to learning technology.

In the online environment, class materials were available to Diana at all times. If she or her classmates missed class, the information was still there. Now, in the face-to-face doctorate program, if others miss class, they email her, and she faxes them the notes. She commented, “Why can’t the professor email the notes to the students? It is frustrating not to have information at my fingertips.” Diana said time demands, meetings with other class members, and gasoline prices have led her to consider changing programs: “If another university gets a doctorate online, I will definitely check into transferring. I can get personal interaction through internships.” Another adjustment to the face-to-face doctoral program was the time spent sitting in class at night after working during the day. Diana described her summer regimen: “Now, I have to sit in class five hours every night. I’m busy. Time is a major factor. I have a two-hour commute round trip.”

Alex repeated the request for higher education to offer more online courses and programs for women. “We don’t just go to work at a job. We come home and work another job,” she said. Universities often don’t offer more online education, Alex commented, “because they want to do it the way it’s always been done. Anything out of that box is trouble, it is unfamiliar, it is job threatening.”

Paige suggested more women, including herself, need access to highly accredited and reputable Ph.D. programs online. She would have continued beyond the master’s degree if there had been an online Ph.D. program in her academic area offered by a highly accredited institution. Paige described the lack of opportunities available to her:

Paige: I would have just gone ahead and continued . . . it would have been fairly easy to me, if I had the opportunity, if I had the access to a good

online Ph.D. I could have. And, I'm still constantly looking, I really am. At a nearby state university, they just started a program, and I wrote to them immediately and said, "Are you going to offer this online?" And, no. I was trying to encourage them, "Well, why don't you start one, and I'll be your first student?"

Question: Well, if they don't hear that [from students], they won't ever consider it.

Paige: So, I was immediately writing to the people managing that program to see if they would please consider it.

Question: What do you think supports that bias against online education?

Paige: Entrenched institutions hold sway. I mean, people just cannot change their paradigm, and in all my Internet research, we've found this to be true, too. In the early 1990s, people were predicting that the Internet was going to completely transform education, and that it was going to be now, and we have some computers in some schools, and the teachers sometimes assign the students to use the computers, but it's not . . . you look at how the progress has been going, and you see social networking exploding, but you see education sitting still. You see the way that people are using computers and the Internet in business, and you see education, and it is sitting nearly still. And, it's a frustration. In a 2004 survey that we conducted with, I think it was about 1300 people across the world, a lot of them saw education as

being one of the disappointments in the Internet age. It had not come along at the pace they had expected it to, and they were disappointed in that. But, overall, you can see that it's actually happening more in third world countries, and it makes a bigger difference to them, so maybe that's the right investment.

Question: Well, there is the African Virtual University and the Open University in England, and I know that they're taking a national approach to human resource development. I don't see that happening here.

Paige: The people who are making the decisions are the entrenched power brokers in the traditional format, and they don't want that format to change. They're comfortable with it, they have power in it, they fear the shift, the power shift that will happen if they start transforming to the new system, and so it might be – it generally is – that the change comes from the grass roots. It does not come from the management level, it comes from the bottom up, not the top down. And, when change will really happen is when people just more and more take control and decide, "If you aren't going to do this, I'm going to do it for myself. I'm going to find a way to education myself without you over in your ivory tower, and I'm going to make it work." And, I think that world wide the confluence of 9/11 and the fact that visas in a lot of the international studies have been unavailable to some people who would have come here to study – a combination of that with MIT

open courseware and so many things that are going on right now – a lot of people who would have come here to be scientists and engineers aren't coming here, they're not getting their higher education in the United States. They're getting an education online and combining that with more in their native countries, so a lot of innovators that we might have had here are now staying there. There is that gap where the U.S. higher education is kind of shooting itself in the foot by not accepting and adopting more of this. Any of the universities that have good faculty and the technical ability to offer this that aren't offering it are not serving the public needs the way they should.

Support Quality in Online Education. As these women asked for greater access to online programs, they also expressed the need for higher education institutions to oversee the quality and support of online programs. They suggested that institutions oversee quality within the programs, designate a contact person to provide students feedback and assistance, update technology and utilize it correctly, publicize online programs based on the reputation of the brick and mortar institution, and focus on the needs of the learner when designing online programs. They also recommended that all areas of the university be aware of how to serve distant students so students at a distance do not face unreasonable demands.

Cara recommended the following for universities planning to deliver online programs:

I would encourage universities to have these programs, but to make sure that somebody is there who is monitoring what they're actually doing online, and that the professor or instructor probably needs to be an even better organized person than a face-to-face teacher. Universities need to make a commitment of experience and skills of people teaching in these degrees. We are in a global economy, and online education is a way for students of different areas to meet with people from around the world. They could open these programs up to international students more.

Taylor suggested that the university require all student service functions to meet the needs of the distant student. During her master's degree, she was contacted by the university by a department that obviously was ill-equipped to serve distant students, "Processes weren't in place at the university to accommodate those people who were not on campus. The university would call at times to tell me to pick something up on campus." Belle suggested oversight of online courses and programs to prevent an online version of the correspondence course:

Institutions must have a person to monitor online learning to ensure that the courses will meet quality standards. Interaction has to be built into the development of the course, built into the activities, the questions in the discussion board, in the pacing of the course modules, in chats, and in the material being chunked in a way to engage people in concepts and activities. In delivery of the online course, the instructor must learn how to ask the next question. How do you re-engage them to take the discussion to the next stage?

Some people think you can do that just by providing the information people need, like driver's education courses you can go to online and take the modules and be done with it. But, for something like a master's degree, that would be equivalent to reading a textbook and taking a test. Some institutions allow this because of a misunderstanding of what online learning is.

Lauren found that many universities are behind in technology. Aileen experienced this in one course in which the instructor presented lectures primarily via streaming video. Aileen didn't like the videos because they would not play correctly, and she explained her frustration with the technology of this particular course:

Even on a high speed connection, it didn't play back very well. The audio streamed perfectly, but the picture stayed the same then changed. It was aggravating, but not debilitating. If the video had been streamed correctly, and only used as an enhancement to lecture, it would have been much better.

Aileen developed a preference for text as the predominant method of imparting information. "I would rather have a text book to look at what they were talking about rather than the whole lecture being online," she said. Overall, Aileen was very pleased with the program despite the one course that relied on lecture videos. She described how she made the decision to select the program based on the reputation of the institution:

The reputation of the institution is important. Some people are leery. I knew of the university. I would be leery of some school I had never heard of. I wouldn't get a degree from a college I had never heard of. I am not familiar with all the types of accreditation, but I knew of the institution.

Lauren found that some people questioned the quality of her online degree, even though it was from an accredited state institution, simply because they associated it with the bad reputation of many unaccredited institutions. She described her experience:

I had people question my degree because of places that don't have a good reputation, and so they think, you know, it was online, but when I did it, the online degree was the hardest thing I ever did. The university that granted my degree is well-known and has an excellent reputation.

Having been one of the first graduates in the online program, Lauren felt the university made the online program more difficult to prove to administrators that it was equal in breadth and rigor to the on-campus program. She explained why she felt this was the case:

What I thought, and some of my friends thought, is that we almost got it harder than face-to-face because they were kind of trying to prove that these guys are doing work, and sometimes we thought, "Boy, this is a killer. How much else can we do?" I felt we got it harder.

Kim said the entire focus of any learning, whether it is face-to-face or online, should be about the needs of the learners:

There have been a lot of debates that an online degree is not as good. There are some people who just absolutely have to sit in a classroom at a certain time with an instructor in front of them and people around them to learn and to get their education, and there are other people who don't need that, who need a different

environment, more flexibility, or a safe place to learn in that flexible environment.

Concern for Other Women

The women in the study expressed concern for other women in their pursuit of education and pointed out that online education may provide potential solutions for women who need to escape abusive situations at home or limiting work environments. The women in this study also expressed a willingness to share expertise they had gained by earning an online degree with other women as a way of supporting and encouraging those who may consider pursuing a degree online.

Potential Solutions for Women. The women in this study spoke unanimously in their view that online education holds great potential for other women to achieve goals, change their status, and gain self-confidence. From their own experience, these women realized online education remains the only way many women can access higher education. For example, online education may provide a way for some to earn their online degrees without others being aware that they are doing so. Lauren related the story of a woman working at a local school district who was completing an online degree: “Her whole plan is to leave, to go somewhere else,” Lauren said. “They may not know she’s working on it, or they don’t acknowledge it. She may not publicize it.”

Similarly, Denise suggested women need expanded access to online education so they may continue in the role of caregiver, yet gain the skills they need without attracting the attention of a spouse. She explained:

Question: Can you relate how online education might be important for women?

Denise: Well, it's back to the any time, any place. So, you can do it while you're holding your baby in your arms and read the screen online, and type with one hand if you have to. You can go to class while you're nursing a baby, for goodness sakes. You know. I mean, if you have a small child. So, the normal things that women go through that are disruptive to education, it minimizes those types of disruptions.

Question: Some people would argue that that's a problem of the woman, that they should just become less concerned with their domestic role and take on – you know what I mean – that somehow they should shift those.

Denise: Those are the type of people who are screwing up our society today.

Question: I mean, in reality, who makes the choice to elevate that responsibility to the top of the importance – to the level of most important in her life? It is usually the woman herself.

Denise: Absolutely. And, you know, some men – let me tell you, there are some men who are not going to help a woman. There are still a lot of chauvinists out there that think that a woman has no part with education, or even working outside the home, for that matter. I mean they're still out there. Thank God, I'm not married to one of them. But, you know, this is a way that you could almost, surreptitiously, if you wanted to, go to school. If you're trying to find a way out of a

situation, you could do it at home when your husband is at work, and he'd never know. Of course, I don't know anybody like that, but it is a possibility.

Question: Really, that is a – do you think that people who counsel women are aware enough of that potential?

Denise: Probably not. Probably not.

Kim described the online environment as “very personal” and especially important for women because “we tend to be lower paid so we can't quit our jobs or move our children to get more education.” Kim added there is a need for more advanced degrees to be offered online by accredited universities because women “need access for continuing education and professional advancement. The master's degree will only get you so far.”

Alex felt many women don't seek an online degree because they don't know what they want to do with the education, feel they don't have the time or money to seek an education, have experienced past failures in school, have a lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem, fear rejection, or have a stigma about their age. She said she can relate to women who lack training, knowledge, and confidence and who want to change occupations. She suggested women begin to envision themselves making a change and doing well:

In this day and age, with the availability of distance education, if you want it, you should do it. It gives you an opportunity to go really far. I know for me, I was unhappy where I was. My job was so unfulfilling. Women have a problem in the

workplace. They stay in a small circle where there are always constraints to thinking outside the box. They do just enough to get by. I could never be happy in that little circle.

The role of online education is a significant one, Alex said, in “giving women a sense of self-esteem or self-empowerment by being able to complete higher education.” To help women make the step into online education, Marion suggested institutions improve their methods of familiarizing first-time students with the technologies they will be expected to use in the educational setting. Women often fear technology because they have been out of touch as technology has advanced rapidly. Marion summarized this potential barrier:

Technology in and of itself can be daunting and frustrating, and if women in particular can get past just their fear of the modality itself, it is something that they can learn, and it is not something that takes an inordinate amount of time. So, that would be, I think, one barrier that could be overcome with some education about the technologies used. I don't think schools, in general, do a very good job of educating people of what kinds of skills and technology knowledge they need in order to be able to take the classes. That would be, I think, one barrier that could be overcome with some education about the technologies used.

Encouragement from other women is also vital for those entering online education. Regina suggested women who have graduated from online programs help other women overcome a lack of confidence by providing encouragement; she shared her perspective on encouraging other women:

I've had lots of women come up to me who knew I took my classes online, and they have asked about the online classes. How did I do it? Or, how did I find them? Because, if they know somebody personally that's done it, then it gives them a confidence that, "Okay, I can go talk to that person." I've had a couple of people here at school who did their degrees online. And, they came and talked to me about online. So, I think you become a role model to others. You know, when you put yourself in that situation, you can be an encourager and a role model for them.

Ultimately, Regina said, the online education can provide women self-respect:

You want your opinions to be respected as a person. You want that to be valued by other people, and I think it's important . . . because it gives you an opportunity to have a value in life. You're an important asset to the community, to the world around you. And, you know, God places us each in our own little world to be an asset and a contributor to the people around us. That's important. Without education, sometimes you lose that.

Meira supported Regina's perspective:

Education is important for everybody, but more so for women because women have more challenges to accessing education once they go beyond the "traditional" age, with families, working full time, and having responsibilities for a family with children. Women in particular lack confidence; they aren't taught that as children. Online learning is stimulation for women. It is important to have resources for doing things in your own time frame. I work at a university, and I

see how tired people are after work. For women, their children are a priority. Flexibility is important for them. I don't think the education establishment is responding, for the most part, to the need for distance education. Most colleges cater to the traditional students who are eighteen to 23 years old. They don't think about the returning adult; they don't think about the person who is continuing their education after maybe ten years. There is resistance from faculty to online courses, and I don't think administrators higher up are pushing it. There are space and time issues at universities that could be solved, but they don't see the value in distance education. With the importance of education today, colleges and universities need to be making it easier for people to pursue the education that is important to them, not just to get a degree, but to get something that's of value to them. The program that may fit you best may not be the one that's right there where you are located physically, and I think a lot more people would pursue education if it was available to them.

Belle explained that women experience guilt and rebel at the thought of doing anything that might compromise their families:

Women are seeking flexibility because of family. We do feel pulled. We do feel guilty for not being with them as much as you could be. People don't want to leave their children. I have a friend who is a single parent who works full time with two children. Online learning is a huge option for people like that because the care-giver can still be in the house. Women are better at multi-tasking than men. Being at home, women can balance so many responsibilities.

Stella said women are culturally expected to be the caregiver, but in many instances, she said, women choose to ensconce themselves more deeply in a traditional role than is necessary. She elaborated on this observation:

Question: How important do you think online learning is for all women, opportunities for learning and achieving their educational goals, for all women?

Stella: Well, I think it's really important. Among my online friends I see a huge range of education levels, and I see that a lot of them are kind of trapped in situations, and I think trapped is an ugly word, and this is another thing that I grew to understand is that a lot of our traps are voluntary and often present in a lot of ways. Living in a foreign country with this wonderful husband and his fabulous parents, that is not exactly what you would call a hardship situation, but it was in a lot of ways a trap. And, so, I think a lot of women do really find themselves having to care for their children at home or in various kinds of situations where, for whatever reason, they have trouble accessing the education they would like to have that they might think would help them personally, or professionally, or for whatever reason, so the more avenues they have to do that, the better.

Gillian agreed that women sometimes, in their zeal to be the model wife and caregiver, stifle their own capabilities and dreams. She said:

Women are well-suited for online education because they wear 300 hats at once and juggle all of their roles. Women are trying to add an education and new skills to their responsibilities, and they will choose not to drive two hours to sit in a class when they are working five days a week and taking care of kids. The biggest consideration of online learning is not disrupting the family. It is a social norm that women are the primary caregivers. Maybe we as educators can help them learn to juggle it all and learn to give up some social norms such as being a neat freak and having a clean house. Education will take you where you want to go, and that's not always increased income for somebody, maybe it's just their own sense of self-worth. However, it helps them improve their life, for whatever matters to them, that's why education is important. I see distance education as giving women a tool to do whatever they want. There are still glass ceilings, and there is not a darned thing I can do about that inequity except give women the skills they need to enhance them in their profession. Education is a way to get skills. . . . I think universities should make it easier to take online classes. Many women defeat themselves. That's the magic of the red shoes in the Wizard of Oz. Dorothy had the power all along. It was within her; she just didn't know it.

Similarly, Adah said while it is true women are unwilling to drop their roles to pursue a degree, online education "is one of those things that makes education more possible." Aileen, a single mom who completed an online degree, suggested there aren't many excuses for not obtaining an education, "especially if you have the technology available, and most people do these days."

Despite emotional, physical, and financial challenges associated with earning an education, Cara emphasized that women must realize the potential for self-improvement and increased self-confidence associated with continuing their education. She described the outlook for women today:

Women with families must have opportunities for self-improvement and continued education to allow them to remain confident in their role as contributors to society as a whole. For many women of today, family fulfillment is not enough to satisfy their inner desires about self. Women also want to set examples for their children, daughters, who are marrying later in life, that a fulfilling career can and should be part of their lives. I think definitely women...need to know that you have to get education to give yourself more opportunities. That you just can't hope that because you have a pretty face or you did okay in high school that you're going to be okay. You have got to give yourself opportunities. The only way to open doors – not the only way, but that is one way that the average person has of opening doors and developing opportunities – is education. Online education is extremely important for women who are working with families.

Gillian, the mother of two daughters, said optimistically:

I believe in the possibilities. That's the one thing I've tried to teach my girls because there is still stereotypical, there is gender bias out there still, but I've taught them that if you keep your eyes open, and you look at all the opportunities out there, they could take you in a direction you've never dreamed. Don't limit

yourself! Be open to everything! Women limit themselves too much because of social norms – get married, be a mom, get a job. Be open to the reality that there are different paths.

Sharing Expertise with Other Women. Martha was the first of the women in this study to express her desire to provide assistance to women who might be searching for information about online education. Here is how Martha described her concern and willingness to help others:

Question: Do you think women who have earned an online degree would ever be interested in contributing something to women who are out there thinking about it who are afraid or have questions about the way it works for me?

Martha: I think so because I think, like I said, most people who go through an online program have specific reasons or barriers or something that was going on that caused them to choose that. So I think then that they would have an understanding and compassion to want to help somebody else who may not know where to look. I had parents who were educated. Mom is in education and so I had some help and direction in where to find the information I needed. How to look it up and how to research a lot of that where I don't think there are a lot of women out who know where to look to get the information to know what's available to them. Go into some of the university web sites. It's very confusing, especially for those looking in to maybe getting

an associate's or a bachelor's and don't have experience with universities, looking online and trying to figure out what classes to take especially for somebody who has no experience with that. I think a lot of women this would benefit are not coming straight out of high school. They haven't just been with their guidance counselor. I think a lot of these are women who may be 30s, 40s, 50s who are looking at going back into education, have not been in school for a long time and just trying to figure it out is just completely overwhelming. Even the terminology that they use and how to get it out there, it's very hard for people who don't have that education and support. I mean just jumping into it and saying, "Okay I want to better my life, and I'm going to go get a college education," just trying to find the information on how to do it is just overwhelming.

Question: That's a good point. I never thought of this before . . . some kind of network of women who have gotten their online degree to provide information. I'm going to mull that one in my mind.

Martha: I think that would be fantastic. To help get the information, just the encouragement, a little cheerleader section to get them going. Yes, you can do it.

Question: That would be phenomenal. I don't know how that would be put together, but it would be great. It would be one of the most gratifying things on earth to do, I think.

Martha: Just ask questions. A place where you can ask questions. Even a lot of people are just intimidated to call a university and ask questions because they think, "I'm going to apply here to get into this school. I don't want them to know how stupid I am by asking this question." I think a lot of times the biggest hurdle for a lot of women is just getting into it. I think that really holds them back, the whole figuring out the process to get into the school really holds back a lot of women.

Question: Would you ever consider posting anything on a discussion board to women who are asking questions?

Martha: You get that together.

Question: You would do it?

Martha: I would do it.

Taylor had a very different experience. She had no help from her parents, and she had to shape her own educational path with the help of a college counselor. She agreed that many women don't even know where to begin, and she, too, shared her concern for them. Taylor considered Martha's idea of an organized way for women who had completed an online degree to share their expertise, advice, knowledge, and support with other women who were trying to find online education, and she responded in this way:

Women don't know where to turn. I want other women to experience that success, that feeling of accomplishment. I'd help anybody. And, it's really sad, and I think we are such a technically advanced society, and, you know, women

can work, and women can do anything, and, you know, you hear that, but in reality, women my age were still raised with parents where the mom stayed at home. Yes, she may have worked, but I mean, I'm in my mid-30s, and most of my parents' friends stayed home until they divorced, and then the mom went back to work with a high school diploma. There weren't a lot of my friends whose moms had any kind of college, and I've seen them struggle from trying to re-marry, to work retail, to go back and get an LVN license, or do in-home daycare.

Meira responded favorably to the idea of graduates of online degrees answering questions asked by women seeking information about an online degree, and she responded, "Oh, definitely! People who completed their degrees that way could be a support for those who are contemplating it." Stella was also enthusiastic in her response:

Oh, yes, I think that would be excellent, an excellent resource. I'd participate in it; I'd be really happy to because I think there are a lot of misconceptions about online education, and it doesn't seem like there is any kind of coordinated information sources out there like there are for typical programs. So, it can be very hit or miss finding information about the different options available and how they work and what some of the terms mean and to be able to talk to other people who have completed an online education. So, yes, I would help.

Excellent Online Instructors

As former online students, the participants were asked to respond to the following scenario: “You have been asked to choose instructors for an online program. What are your criteria for selecting the online instructors?” In their responses, the women in this study identified characteristics they felt were essential in excellent online instructors, some of which they valued in the online instructors and advisors they had actually had in their degree programs. Additionally, these women also provided suggestions for universities in their process of selecting online instructors.

Characteristics of Excellent Online Instructors. None of these graduates had any difficulty naming characteristics that were evident in an excellent online instructor. They had experienced classes led by excellent instructors and, in a few cases, not very excellent instructors. So, when asked, it was not difficult for them to remember back to their experience and note those things they valued in their instructors and advisors. Personal, caring, communicative, supportive, respectful, competent with the technology, willing to share their personalities, knowledgeable in his or her field, the ability and willingness to share power are indicative of the myriad characteristics that were highly valued by these online veterans. The perspectives of each of the women will be given in this section in the order they were received during the data collection phase.

Regina: I think they have to be very personal. You have to feel like you can trust them at the very beginning. They have to make you feel that they are interested in you. They have to make you feel that they want you to be successful, and they’re going to do whatever it takes to make

you successful. And, if they can make you feel like you are important to them, and that they're going to do whatever they can to help you fulfill your dreams...it's a dream, when you pursue your degree. I think that's what happened with my instructors. They answered promptly and made me feel like I didn't have a stupid question, and I think it's important to have that contact with them.

Adah: I would say good communication because that's the first thing that came to mind. But, you said something like technical skills, and I went, "Oh, my gosh, yes." Because technical skills are part of the communication process online. They are linked. You cannot communicate well online if you don't have the technical understanding of how to get online and stay online, how to work the software. I did have instructors who were so limited in that, it was a frustration and a barrier to learning. You've got to understand the tool. It's not that the tool is so important, but it's that perception that the pedagogy is directly linked to being able to use the tool. The personality and tone of the class is set by the person who is teaching it. It is set by the moderator, especially if you're having synchronous chat, but even in an asynchronous way. I mean, there is a lot of personality that still comes through in the way they structure their assignments, the way they communicate their assignments, whether they enjoy what they're doing or not. I think they're just as obvious

online as they are in a classroom. Just because you can't see them grimace doesn't mean you can't feel it.

Paige: The instructors who were the most effective let their personalities shine through, and they were good writers. I had an instructor who was abrupt, and kind of rude, and all the rest of us, the people in the class, would talk about her behind her back and wonder what she looked like and what she was really like in person. And, when I met her, her personality in person was, I mean, you could tell it in the words on the page, you could tell how she would be in person, it really just flowed; there was no doubt, there was no disconnect there. She was abrupt, and to the point, and just kind of a basic person who would then sometimes be rude to you because her approach was straight and direct and she didn't care about people's feelings. She couldn't hide that online. Most of the professors I had were fantastic; they were approachable, they were in the mentor role, they were encouraging and supportive, they thought ahead and gave advice that was valuable. They were able to convey a lot of information very efficiently and in a very friendly manner. I would pick the people who wind up having the evaluations that say, "This was the hardest class I ever took in my life, and I loved every minute of it."

Dedra: Online instructors must have a knowledge of the field first. They must have the ability to share the power, awareness that it needs to be done,

and an acceptance of the awareness that it needs to be done. I want somebody who is able to envision what those students are going to have to go through to learn what you're trying to teach, which means you don't give them unnecessary hoops to jump through. But, you also don't make it so cut and dried that they might as well just get a good book and get it instead. So, it's got to have an element of complexity that makes it challenging, and the students feels they have accomplished something by working through this maze of requirements, but not stupidly convoluted so that...they become constantly disoriented by the expectation. The technology ought to be effortless, or basically effortless, the real challenge ought to be in mastering the course content. That's what you're there for. You shouldn't be doing it just because it's "Gee whiz technology, and we've got to figure out something to do just because we want to use the technology." The way they give you advanced organizers for what you are going to encounter module by module, I found that to be a mark to me of the commitment the professor had for teaching me. Just posting a, "Here are Your Assignments" page, I don't consider teaching me. You know, where do you communicate to me your passion for whatever it is you're trying to teach me? And, the professors who could do that were the ones that were valuable, however they structured the course to do that. There was something

about the immediacy of a chat that made it more real to me. When it's just through email or just a posted announcement, there is no conversation that's going on. It's not going anywhere. It's just, here's the information, and there it sits. The classes in which there was not a synchronous interaction with students, I felt I wasn't getting, I kept thinking, "There are these people. They've got their advanced degrees. They know all this stuff. Don't hold onto it. I need to know what you know." So, the ones that communicated to me in sparing ways I thought I was getting shortchanged because I thought they knew a whole lot more and would have told me a whole lot more if I had been right there with them. I thought, but these are people who are experts in something or another, and if they're not giving some of that to me, then they're just kind of phoning it in, and I wanted more than that.

Denise: Communication. If the instructor isn't communicative, and gives no more than a yes, no, or okay answer, or they don't log on regularly, or they don't act like they value, you know, value their presence, you don't value the class very much. And, how would you feel if you showed up for class in a face-to-face course and the instructor decides they weren't going to come, or they were really late, or they were going to leave early all the time? You know, same thing. Online, same thing. Communication was the way they established that presence.

How does that come through in an online course? Well, it's the same difference between getting a greeting card from someone who just signed their name to it. The message is still there, but it's kind of like, well, you did pick out the greeting card and went through the time to put your name on it, mail it and all of that. But then the difference in getting a greeting card that has some sort of personal message added to it. Some instructors did nothing more than send the greeting card, but then there were other ones that had the greeting card with a personal message inside. You can tell. You can tell. It was the same thing in the face-to-face classroom. How many times have I heard students complain, "I had to do this twenty page research paper and it came back with a C on it, and there's not one mark on the paper." It's the same difference. Just because you are in a classroom with the instructor doesn't mean that the communication is good and the feedback is good. Because you have some instructors who stand up there, and they have their yellowed lecture notes, and they talk from the time class starts until the time class ends. And, if you raise your hands, they're so into reading their yellowed notes they may or may not let you interject. Good teaching is good teaching whether it's in the classroom or online. Period. That's all. That's the basis of the whole thing. What's good teaching? When the students feel like they

have actually walked away with something that they can value, and use, and apply in their real life.

Marion: I would think that a given would be that they would obviously have a body of knowledge to be able to deliver the content. The other thing that I think that would be required is that they have compassion, and I say that because sometimes technology doesn't work. Sometimes, like right now, there is a thunderstorm that is passing overhead that might interfere with somebody's ability to be able to participate in class. And, those aren't excuses, those are the realities of a technical environment. And, so, for a professor to say, "You've got to be online, and you've got to be online at this particular time," doesn't take into account the non-physical universe that is operating that may not let that happen. And, they also have to understand how to build a sense of community and classroom in that online environment because it is very different from the face-to-face environment and students who are able to meet and talk and chat with each other before class begins and after class begins and how that important instructional process is what happens in the classroom.

Alex: They have to know their subject, but they also have to be able to present it in a way that will work for them and work for their students. It's not just like getting up and lecturing. Because if a professor just stood up and lectured in front of a camera, it's really not as effective

as the interactive. And, caring is a big deal. Everybody wants to know that somebody, especially in the higher level education, actually cares that you're going to do well, and you're going to stick this out, and it's important to them as a professor and as a teacher that their students are doing well.

Diana: Online instructors have to have the human aspect; they have to read people. They have to relate in a human way through a machine. A good instructor will direct students; a bad instructor will measure them according to a rubric and a grade. It is important to choose teachers who have an elementary mindset, never talk down to us, are never regimented, are always personable, have a zeal to help us learn, have compassion, will not talk down to students regarding technology, realize there are no stupid questions and that smart people ask questions, will provide step-by-step instructions, will redirect students when they get off topic, are always there for students, and are encouraging.

Kim: What I valued most in the instructors was their real world experience. The things they were teaching us were things they had lived through. They shared with us what they had to deal with. That meant a lot. They weren't just making something up. These people had many, many years of experience, and it was very encouraging. So, they were sharing their secrets with us. And, there was also a feeling of surprise

that some of the instructors I had in the class were out there and known by an international community of people. So, when someone like that compliments your work, or would challenge you to do better, it was someone who was really in there trying to make things better, and we were learning. Online instructors need to be highly organized, have time to answer email in a timely fashion, have real-world experience, design the learning to consider different learning styles and are adept at teaching to different learning styles, and require group work for projects and communication that promotes interaction. This forced us to work with different personalities and different technologies. Now, I use those technologies.

Aileen: I would choose professors who know what I do, how I think, how our brains work; who have an understanding of what I do; who know they are not going to convert us to be devotees to his area but will help us appreciate it more; who respect our preconceptions and beliefs but try to expose us to things we haven't thought about before; who put things in context – how we might use them; who are in touch with the field outside of academia.

Lauren: Instructors should demonstrate a willingness to help students. The tone and content of what the professor says carries a great deal of meaning. For example, I had an instructor who responded to students with sarcastic messages that began, "My dear students, if you would

bother to read the syllabus,” or “Read your book, and you’ll find out.”

The structure of the course – how well prepared and organized it is – shows participants what is going to happen. A good instructor provides a sequence of activities, promotes interaction among students and with the instructor, and places emphasis on the human aspect more than the technical skills. More communication . . . makes the course more real.

Martha: Of course you want somebody who has knowledge in the area that they’re working, but also someone who understands that most of the time in online degrees you are dealing with people who have jobs and families and life that not everything is going to necessarily happen Tuesday and Thursdays from 10:00 to 11:00. So people who are flexible. You want somebody who is going to respond quickly. That was very important. That when I had a question, this was the time I had set aside this to do this work, and I needed responses.

Taylor: Good online instructors are top in their disciplines. They need to know their stuff. Someone else can set up the technology for them. They need to answer their email; they are available by email and by telephone. A good online instructor will start with the audience. Instructors must know who their audience is to make decisions about instruction.

Meira: I did not have faculty who did not care. All the online instructors were *very* responsive. I steered away from one course because I heard that the instructor wasn't responsive. I heard that from another faculty member. It is difficult to understand that attitude because I don't think most people are forced into teaching online. Online instructors need to be responsive – this is critical, really key. There is nothing like sitting at home with no resource to get an answer. They need to be capable of empathizing with students; comfortable with technology; flexible – able to respond quickly and improvise for a student or for the class; supportive of students, yet understanding of needs present in our lives - things break down; knowledgeable of the content area; patient; able to carry on a virtual conversation; and able to keep people on topic. I'm not sure what skill set that is. Online learners need to be very structured, organized and disciplined; interested in learning; creative; flexible; able to respond quickly; and have some comfort level with technology.

Belle: Excellent online instructors have strong written communication skills and send a notification to students when he or she will be out of contact for a designated period. The instructor has a view that online learning is to be an interactive environment; knows how to chunk material in such a way that it engages people in a meaningful way about a particular objective or concept; is able to think ahead and be

creative in putting together resources; makes decisions about activities in the course – will they be question and answer or projects, for example; is good at questioning and knows how to prompt students with questions in the discussion board to re-engage them and take the discussion to a higher level; is willing to be flexible; models a willingness to learn; and should have been an online student at some point. Someone who has never been an online learner might be less understanding when glitches happen. You have to be on the other side of it before you teach an online class. You must know where your students are coming from. Not everyone is an online learner. Some people are not able to maintain the steady pace of doing work. Some people think that online learning is going to be much easier, but they will do the same amount of work, or maybe more, in an online class. Also, they are forced into an environment of participation.

Cara: Excellent online instructors are willing to provide students adequate feedback. They are someone with a writing background. They have hands-on experience in their field, they are approachable so students do not feel intimidated, they are willing to make a commitment to respond to students within a stated time frame, and they are willing to grade student work within a stated time frame. I think that if the student is expected to meet deadlines, I don't see any reason why they

couldn't make that kind of commitment. They also should be willing to be flexible.

Gillian: Excellent online instructors have exhibited creativity in past teaching, demonstrate passion for the subject, are willing to try new things, are self-directed, are good writers, have a sense of humor, and show enthusiasm for what they are doing. You can't just put words up there; text is not necessarily instruction. The way you chunk your information, and the words you choose, come across on a Web page. The colors, links, basic techniques, and the creativity convey meaning well before the interaction. I need to feel some passion coming back at me! I can feel the excitement coming back at me! If I have a choice to learn through face-to-face or online, I will pick online every time because of the convenience factor and because the classes are pretty darned good because the instructor believes in it. The face-to-face persona comes through online.

Stella: Mainly, online instructors must be very conversant and familiar with a range of online technologies that you can create yourself or utilize online; must be really good at fostering discussion among students, whether synchronous or asynchronous; must have the ability to pose questions that are provocative and urge discussion along; and must be a good typist – most important in the synchronous environment. My mother didn't want me to take typing because she was afraid I would

always be cast as a secretary. She tried to discourage me, but I took it in high school and college. When I was a sophomore in college, I got my own computer. Now, typing is a basic life skill, and it's no longer gendered.

Selecting Online Instructors. Universities face the responsibility of selecting instructors who will be successful in teaching students online. The participants of this study made the following suggestions for university administrators involved in the selection of faculty to teach online courses:

- Put prospective online faculty through a chat where all interaction is online. You can tell a lot of the mannerisms of a person online.
- Test their knowledge of the field.
- Test how well they can take their knowledge and mannerisms and apply them to the online environment.
- Determine whether he or she will allow students to interject their learning and expand on that. It is important for the learning to be personal and relevant to the students. Too many instructors are brilliant but don't want other opinions.

For the women who participated in this study, the online mode of delivery became critical to their educational attainment and subsequent major life decisions. By utilizing computer technology and the Internet to enroll in an online master's degree program, these eighteen women were able to overcome a variety of barriers to earning the degree of their choice.

Summarization of Perspectives of Participants

In this chapter, the shared experiences of participants were categorized as barriers to higher education, benefits of online education, professional development that resulted from earning the degree, personal development that resulted from the learning experience, the impact their earning the online degree had on other people in their families, the double standard for women in advancement and rewards in the workplace, higher education's need for change, the concern felt by these participants for other women facing barriers to educational attainment, and characteristics of excellent online instructors. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to short summaries of the perspectives that were shared by the participants and reported in Chapter IV.

Summary of Barriers to Higher Education

All the women in this study communicated during the interviews that they had confronted barriers that threatened their progress toward educational attainment. Participants sought online education in order to overcome barriers to higher education.

Institutional, Situational, and Dispositional Barriers. Barriers were categorized as institutional – those related to the university such as faculty attitudes, the unavailability of needed degree programs, hostile face-to-face classroom environments with dominant and extrovert personalities; situational – those related to illness, being a primary caregiver; geographic location, family opposition, or poor internet connectivity; and dispositional barriers - those related to internal feelings, such as lack of self-confidence, shyness, unpleasant experiences in the traditional classroom, and a

preference for independent, self-directed learning situations. Paige encountered elitist attitudes and a year-and-a-half delay to acceptance into a master's program at a traditional institution. The degree Cara wanted was not available at a university anywhere near her location. Belle had an infant and could not drive an hour to the nearest university. Kim dropped out of a face-to-face master's program because the classroom environment was hostile due to dominant and extrovert personalities who were left unchecked by the instructor. Adah learned she was pregnant, and she began experiencing severe and debilitating morning sickness that prevented her from considering an on-ground master's program. Aileen, a single parent, would not sacrifice her responsibilities as caregiver to both her 9-year-old daughter and her mother, who had been severely injured in an automobile accident.

Geographic distance was a significant barrier for many of the participants. For example Regina, Denise, Taylor, Martha, Gillian, Lauren, and Marion lived in rural areas that were not near a university offering their degree of choice; Meira's husband was in the military and was regularly changing geographic locations; and Stella lived in a foreign country. Family opposition also played a role in making it difficult for some of the participants to attain an advanced degree. Paige's spouse and parents were resistant to her decision to enter the master's program. Marion's extended family refused to acknowledge her participation in the degree program, and Alex's parents were non-supportive. Other barriers were based in the disposition of the participant. For instance, Marion, an African-American woman, wanted to be in a learning environment where her intellect, rather than her race, was the primary consideration. Lauren and Kim described

themselves as shy, and both had unpleasant memories of the face-to-face learning environment. And, Taylor wanted to be in a highly interactive environment rather than the traditional classroom where she said students just “sit and get.”

Summary of Benefits of Online Education

The women of this study related many benefits which resulted from their experience with online learning. These included connectedness with instructors, peer, and “bridge” person, flexibility, greater diversity, safe learning environment, anonymity, and engaged learning. Details of these benefits are provided in the following section.

Connectedness with Instructors, Peers, and “Bridge” Person. One of the primary benefits of the online environment was the connectedness students felt with peers and the instructor, but they also described feeling connected to a “bridge” person who was not the instructor. This person may have been a program advisor, thesis advisor, or, as in one instance, an administrative assistant who was support staff for students in the online program. Paige described the bridge person in her program as someone she could ask questions of “without fear of appearing stupid or without bothering the professor.” Alex said for her the bridge person was her program advisor. He “demonstrated caring, wanted to see students succeed, and provided prompt and supportive feedback.” Cara, on the other hand, said her thesis advisors were the bridge persons in her program. They were supportive and valued her research.

Students felt a sense of connection with their instructors and other students in the online program because of feedback from the instructor, collaborative projects with

classmates, asynchronous discussion board reflections, synchronous chats, and emails. Aileen liked the fact that she could tell her professor what she thought about topics that came up during the course, and one instructor in particular encouraged her to think for herself. Belle said she felt “more connected to the professor than I did in my undergraduate work.” Similarly, Gillian said she received “more attention from the online professors than a resident student does.” Martha suggested, “You are one-on-one with an instructor focused on your topics, specific needs, and goals. I think you get more of a personalized education.”

Aileen valued group projects with people who were thousands of miles away from her location. Kim found that being forced to work as a group with different personalities and technologies prepared her for her career path where she now feels confident in similar situations. Regina became friends with two ladies in a group project as a result of their communication and collaboration, and Lauren has remained friends with one of her online classmates who was in a group project.

Since Meira had experienced many different educational delivery methods, she was able to compare the level of interaction and connectedness in the correspondence model of distance education, the face-to-face model of traditional education, and the online environment. Meira said she had no interaction with anyone in the correspondence model, and in the traditional classroom, she was expected to read the text and sit in class listening to the instructor. However, she found the online environment to be rich in interaction with her instructor and her peers, which led her to feel more connected in the class and “more inclined to participate.”

Whereas some of the participants valued the chat feature in the online environment because it brought a sense of immediacy to the discussions, other participants felt the reflective discussion board better suited their learning preferences. For example, Martha chose online courses that included chat, whereas Taylor said she didn't like chat and would, when possible, avoid courses which listed chat as a requirement. Alex, like Taylor, said she preferred the discussion board because she wanted to spend time doing extra research about the postings of other people, and reflect on her answer, before she posted her own response. Adah described herself as a "social person" who liked to engage in multiple chat conversations at one time. She was able to do this in the classroom chat by utilizing the private "whisper" feature of the chat tool. This social interaction was vital to her online experience and contributed to her learning.

Flexibility. Another benefit of the online environment noted by the participants of this study was the tremendous flexibility it provided them. The participants shared that because the master's program was online, they were able to continue a full time job and be at home at night with their children; complete course work when it best fit their schedule, even if that meant 4:00 a.m.; go through a pregnancy, and, for one woman, with ongoing morning sickness, without having anyone know or factor that into their participation in the course; or, as in Alex's case, go on a cruise with her family and still complete class activities and assignments while on the ship.

Greater Diversity. One of the most highly valued aspects of earning an online degree was the opportunity afforded these women to engage intellectually with people from around the world. The level of diversity in the classes could not have been

available to many who lived in rural areas, especially. Paige said the fact that personalities came through in the online environment allowed her to value the diversity even more. Marion, for example, developed friendships and professional contacts that would have been impossible otherwise because she lived in a rural area and was “divorced from people” in her profession. “It gave me a community of people that I could talk to, and I couldn’t otherwise,” Marion concluded. Adah added that having people from around the globe in her classes “brought a really interesting flavor that I think is magnificent in education.” Literally, Diana said she felt the world was at her fingertips.

Safe Learning Environment. Kim had traveled across the country with her husband so she could enroll in a well-respected face-to-face master’s program in her field. After a short time of enduring a hostile classroom environment in which dominant and extrovert personalities literally controlled the class discussions, Kim dropped out. She read an ad in an educational journal about an online master’s program in her field, and she decided to give it a try. What she found, she said, was a safe learning environment. This sentiment was shared by all of the participants, and some of their comments will be shared in this conclusion. Diana found that in the online environment, she could type her justification for making a statement, and dissenting views were not threatening to her.

Now, she is in a traditional doctorate program, and she has been humiliated by the instructor and classifies the classroom environment as threatening. Meira suggested the online environment promotes equity, and she added that “everyone is on an equal

playing field; we weren't judged differently." Taylor felt there was less risk to making a contribution in the online class. Lauren, who said she was a shy person, remembered being acutely embarrassed by an instructor during her undergraduate experience, yet behind the computer screen she had courage to give her opinions. While Denise felt one advantage of the online program was the fact that she could more easily ignore annoying people who try to dominate class discussions, Adah valued an environment she felt was free from stereotypes and prejudices. Paige summarized this as an environment in which "all judgments are left behind; you are left with pure mind-to-mind communication."

Anonymity. It wasn't until Marion contributed her perspective on the value of anonymity in the online environment that it was considered by the participants. Marion, an African-American woman, said this aspect of online learning was crucial to her. "Race and color" Marion said, "did not figure into the equation at all. It was a tremendously freeing environment to be as intellectually challenging, and as challenged, as I wanted to be." Stella admitted to not having given this much thought while she was in the online program. "It's sad to say I'm your basic white, middle class kind of indiscriminate European origin person, so I never really thought about it, but it has come up a lot of other times in other people's interactions." Paige said she didn't need to see the faces of people in her online class, and "it removed some of the baggage not to know what everybody looked like." Alex wanted anonymity because she didn't have to worry about what others thought.

Martha had her third child, and suffered morning sickness, while enrolled in her online program, and no one had to know. Adah suffered morning sickness for nine

months while taking online classes, and Marion also had her third child during the online program, and they preferred that it be unknown to others in the class and the instructors. Kim was shy, she said, but had courage to speak online. Lauren was also shy, but found that the online environment reduced her self-consciousness and led her to speak out more. She also recalled that a classmate she came to know was extremely overweight and had always felt discriminated against and felt that people thought she was stupid because she was fat. “She didn’t have that online,” Lauren said.

Belle had surgery on her face for skin cancer, and she would not post a photo of herself online and still felt uncomfortable about her appearance. Aileen said anonymity had not entered her mind because everyone in her classes shared so much information about each other, and a photo had to be posted by each member of the class. She did feel, in retrospect, however, that had the issue come up, her instructors would have been flexible. Meira had not thought about anonymity, either, but she acknowledged that physical appearance makes a “huge impact on people and how they interact with you.” As we talked during the interview, she began to name different groups of people who might value anonymity: people of different ethnic backgrounds, people who are older and don’t feel comfortable in class with young students, someone who stutters, or someone who has a physical disability or impairment. Meira noted, too, that “gender was equaled out” in her online classes. It was not an issue, perhaps due to the anonymity.

Engaged Learning. The women of this study were very outspoken about the level of engaged learning that took place in the online learning environment. Dedra, for example, said she was “energized” by the online discussions, chats, and readings, and

didn't need to be sitting in a classroom listening to an instructor lecture to experience that level of learning. Meira also felt that there was more control over the learning in the online setting. "In the online classes," Meira said, "you have to read materials and teach yourself the materials. In the face-to-face classroom, you go and sit. Going and sitting in a classroom and being there doesn't mean you are learning." As Taylor was given thoughts and ideas to begin her own research and reflection, she gained self-confidence. Alex commented that during her undergraduate learning, she memorized details which have been forgotten, but she remembers well the concepts she learned in her online classes, possibly because many of them were formulated during group projects or while formulating a reflection to class discussion.

Summary of Professional Development

Career opportunities were a direct outcome of earning the online master's degree for many of the participants. Some of those scenarios will be shared in this summary. They include new career opportunities, connectedness in a professional community, and credibility among peers.

New Career Opportunities. Adah, for instance, earned a position teaching at a university, and she commented, "I have a job I could not have gotten without the degree, and I have a degree I could not have gotten if it had not been offered online." As a result of her master's thesis, Stella was asked to co-author a book, and this led to her decision to pursue a Ph.D. Within months of graduating, Cara got a job that did not exist when

she started her online degree program. Being the first graduate of the online program positioned her to be recommended for the position by her thesis advisor.

Due to the master's degree, Taylor was able to immediately earn her principal certification and accept a new job as assistant principal at an elementary school. Alex accrued the knowledge and skills she needed to join her husband's business of designing Web sites and Web-based materials. Lauren was hired for a new position one semester before she completed her master's degree, and she got a \$6,000 increase in pay. Belle accepted a new position and, as a result of her master's program, also had the skills to begin teaching online courses.

Connectedness in a Professional Community. For many of these women, they met and conversed for the first time with other professionals in their fields who shared similar philosophies and experienced similar challenges in the workplace. Dedra said she felt for the first time she met others who truly understood frustrations she had experienced in her job. Cara was able to utilize the network of people from her online degree program as a resource after beginning her new career. Belle became part of a larger network of professionals. She gained a "broader perspective of the world, what is happening to education, and funding resources online." Martha found herself continuing to communicate and share with other people in the field that she met in the online program.

Credibility Among Peers. For some women in this study, earning credibility associated with a master's degree was imperative to their professional lives. Denise, a director of distance learning at a rural community college, needed credibility when

counseling faculty about online learning. Martha wanted, and gained, respect and status in her job. Meira found that those she worked with respected the fact that she had earned a master's degree, and they also recognized and sought out her expertise.

Adah wanted the credibility the degree gave her in the eyes of others, and it helped her secure a teaching position at the university. Marion, who was already teaching at a university, earned credibility from her students because she shared her learning experiences with them as she progressed in the program. Regina found that the professionals she taught in her field had greater trust in her after she earned the degree. Paige established global research-based relationships and built friendships with people in other countries who respect her as a researcher.

Summary of Personal Development

Participants in this study also noted personal development, with gains in self-respect and confidence and the inner strength to be a role model for their families. Details of their personal development are provided in this summary.

Self-respect and Confidence. For many of the participants, the gains in self-respect and confidence were key outcomes. These participants wanted to complete the degree so they could respond with confidence to administrators or to satisfy a goal they had set for themselves and had never fulfilled. Lauren, for example, had doubts about her capabilities as a student prior to earning the online degree, and earning the degree satisfied those doubts. Regina married at the age of sixteen and missed her high school graduation; she gained self-respect and confidence, and fulfilled a rite of passage, when

she completed the master's degree. Meira said she now feels very confident in her work and can compete with people who are "20 years younger."

Cara has a sense of pride in herself for earning the degree, and she feels she has a lot to offer an employer. Aileen is more confident in her ideas and philosophies, and she has found that the degree makes a difference with upper administrators in her field. For Marion, the online master's degree resulted in self-respect, and, consequently, became "a trajectory and a stepping stone to the Ph.D." Marion defended her dissertation and graduated with the Ph.D. after our interview was conducted for this study. For Belle, the degree provided new confidence, and Alex found that she can demand respect when dealing with other professionals. Kim not only gained new confidence in herself; she developed higher expectations for others in her profession.

Inner Strength to be a Role Model. One of the driving forces behind the motivation in these women to earn a master's degree was to serve as a role model for their children. "The most important outcome of earning the online degree was the example set for my children," Denise said adamantly. Gillian noted her two daughters were proud of her and encouraged her to pursue a doctorate after she finished the online master's degree. Gillian reported to me recently that she will be completing an online doctoral program within the year. Marion wanted to change the viewpoint of her children to think beyond a basic college degree; because she became "learning mommy" by earning both an online master's and a Ph.D., Marion's children "now think about getting a Ph.D. as opposed to just going to college."

Martha wanted to show her children that “learning never stops,” while Taylor’s children have seen the financial differences in their family and have commented that “education pays.” Belle’s family watched her do her course work on the computer in their living room, and Alex received a great deal of support and motivation from her husband and two children. Cara wanted her 16-year-old daughter to think about what she wants for her life while still young; Cara admitted she hopes her daughter will see her career and want to pursue an education before marriage and children. Having parents with college degrees altered the perception of Lauren’s employer to the point that he gave Lauren’s daughter a better position within the company. After seeing this, Lauren’s daughter now wants to earn a degree. Paige overcame significant family resistance to earn the master’s degree, and she was adamant that having the degree has helped her children and family rather than taken from them. Paige remarked, “I think both of my children benefit from my advanced degree and my level of education every day because I bring that home with me.”

Summary of the Impact on Others

As the women of this study completed their online degrees, they found that their achievement and attainment affected others. Members of their immediate or extended families chose to emulate their behavior and return to college. In addition, relationships with others changed as a result of their degree attainment. Examples of how their degree attainment affected other people and their relationships are described in this summary.

Domino Effect of Earning an Online Degree. After struggling to earn their online degrees, some of the women found that members of their families enrolled in online or face-to-face college degree programs. “I found it’s a domino effect if one woman stands up and does it,” Taylor suggested. Taylor’s husband is now earning an online degree, and her sister-in-law returned to college for a nursing degree. Aileen’s mom earned an online master’s degree after Aileen completed her online master’s program. Martha’s sister, who is dyslexic, took courses online and then returned to college where she earned a degree in forensic science and criminal justice. “She saw there was a different way and that she could do it,” Martha added.

Relationship Changes. Several of the participants of the study experienced changes in relationships with members of their family. Taylor, for example, had to move out of her home and live with friends and family members during her high school years because her father was an alcoholic, and she didn’t get along with her mom. Taylor’s parents divorced just as she completed high school, and she described them as “toxic” to her. However, after Taylor earned the online master’s degree, her mother was very proud. “It has closed the gaps in a lot of ways,” Taylor shared. “It has closed the gap.” Lauren had a change in relationships within her community, and they weren’t positive changes.

People in her community made negative remarks to Lauren that she must feel she was “too good” for them. Lauren explained, “Certain cultures don’t want you to do better because they feel they lose you.” Another example is that of Aileen and her daughter. Aileen’s 9-year-old daughter had been opposed to the idea of her mother

earning a doctorate degree until Aileen completed the master's degree online. Now, Aileen reported, her daughter has no objections to Aileen applying to an online doctoral degree program.

Summary of the Double Standard for Women

Even though the women of this study experienced great benefits from earning an online degree, they shared their experiences with discrimination in the work place, and their realization that discrimination, as well as barriers to advancement, still exist for women. Exceptions were the women who were in female-dominated professions or who had lived in a different country.

Women Still Face Discrimination. As noted earlier in the chapter, women must out-perform men to earn promotion and advancement (Bierema, 2001; Cohen & Huffman, 2003; Cunningham, 2006; Euben, 2001; Jarrell & Stanley, 2004; Marschke et al., 2007; Martin, 2000; Maume, 2004; Noe, 2002). The women of this study were asked to respond to the quote by Noe (2002), "Men get evaluated based on their potential, women based on their performance" (p. 348), and some of their responses are shared in this summary:

- Lauren agreed with the statement and shared her own experience with discrimination. She moved from one job to another after earning the master's degree. She was told by her former employer that because she was a female she didn't get the pay increase that was given to a man hired for her position, even though he had no master's degree and fewer years experience. Lauren's former

employer confirmed that she would never have been allowed to earn as much as a male, even if she had a master's degree.

- Belle commented, "It rings true based on everything that you see in our society." Although she had not personally experienced discrimination, she had witnessed it in her workplace. "I know there was a man brought into our school district with the intent of moving him up when a position became available. Would it have happened that way for a woman? Interesting."
- Meira described her work as female-dominated, but she noted that there was evidence of gender discrimination in other departments at her university. "Our office is female-based; there are only one or two males, but in the university as a whole, you can see there are males who are promoted based on potential rather than performance."
- Cara responded, "People have no imagination for seeing the potential in a person, especially for women, I think. Women, too, may be stuck in this, 'A woman can only do certain things, and men can do anything.'"
- Taylor agreed with Noe (2002) and noted, "Even our superintendent has made the comment, 'We need to get more men in here.' If a woman is being considered for a promotion, they would look at her past performance. A woman has to show what she can do."
- Martha suggested gender inequities are obvious in her field of elementary education. "There are so few men in elementary education that if a man shows an interest, he is eased into a position."

- Regina, in referring to gains women have made in the workplace, noted, “We’ve come a long way, but we have a long way to go. I think in a business sense, unfortunately, we don’t get the same pay as a man.”
- Paige acknowledged that women often choose careers and positions that accommodate their role as care-giver, and they may avoid roles which require a great deal of energy to achieve in a male-dominated world. Paige made this observation:

It’s just that I think that it’s very difficult to find a woman who is willing to bump up against the male-dominated power structure right now and have to go through all that’s involved, even like playing golf, talking about the football game, but in the men’s minds, it has a lot to do with business. And, that’s how they work. And, overcoming that takes a woman who is willing to just be determined that it is not right and it needs to be overcome. When you’re the care-giver, it’s also hard to step into the power structure and perform in that power structure the way you need to without becoming extremely frustrated by it. I just wouldn’t do that. I just can’t put up with the garbage that’s involved with having to put up with that power structure.

- Alex responded, “Yes, men are given so much more consideration, even if they don’t have the degree, than women are. Women also have to have a master’s degree to compete with a bachelor’s in a man.” Women are also looked at where they are in life – married, with children, pregnant, single, and those things are not

taken into consideration for a man, Alex felt, and she added, “The women almost have to be better. Education makes a boost.” The degree, her mother told her, “will show stability, it will show that you are able to stick to something, that you are able to follow through on something.”

- Adah teaches at a private university – the same university where her husband teaches, and she saw a definite difference in the way their capabilities were assessed. “If I hadn’t been able to prove I was excellent at what I do, I’m not sure I would have been able to keep my position; whereas, my husband came in ABD, and it was assumed he would be good at the job he was given.”

Perspectives of Women in Female-dominated Professions. Women who change careers often begin in a female-dominated career and then move into a gender-neutral career (Whitmarsh et al., 2007). These authors also reported that women in female-dominated careers had fewer obstacles in their career paths than women in gender-neutral careers. The two women in the study who disagreed with the statement by Noe (2002) were Kim, who worked in a female-dominated profession where men have only subordinate roles, and Stella, who had lived in a different culture overseas for ten years. Stella commented on the quote by Noe (2002), “I kind of have a knee-jerk reaction against it. It seems a little discriminatory against men. I’m not sure about that.” Stella’s career field was male dominated in Europe but predominantly female in the United States.

Summary of Higher Education's Need for Change

During the interview process, each participant was asked how higher education might need to change. They suggested that higher education should strive to avoid creating barriers created by leadership, expand access to higher education by increasing the number of online degree programs, and carefully oversee quality in online education.

Avoid Barriers Created by Leadership. Despite significant growth in enrollments in online courses and programs, the response of higher education to the demand was considered inadequate by participants of this study. The paucity of advanced online degrees offered by respected brick and mortar institutions caused these women to comment on various aspects of higher education that still disallow women opportunities to education. Paige, for example, shared her thoughts that higher education has not adequately responded to the need for more plentiful and more advanced online offerings:

I think it [higher education] is still that entrenched, traditional approach, and the fact is that the people in the power structure don't see the need. . . . Why aren't we trying to reach out to the people who are out there, who have the intellect to be able to master this material, and to transform their lives and become people who are important in these fields? But, they can't do it unless they can do it online. A lot of those people are women. The college presidents are being judged by whether or not they can raise \$2 billion to build a new business school, and that's their legacy. It's something that they can point to over there, and it's got their name on it, see. Look at the 5-year plans of most institutions, and what they are talking about is building things, building more buildings, building a better

football team, because athletics are so important, and that's male driven things. I mean, I don't really know that if women were in charge if that would always be happening. I think there are some women who would base their self-worth on whether or not they built a bunch of buildings on a campus as a president, but I think there would be a lot more of them who would be inclined to think that building the lives of people who can influence people would be the most important thing.

Dedra echoed this sentiment:

The world is flat, and educators haven't caught onto that, yet. It's all about power. Obviously online learning is subversive in that it gets around the power structure. And so, the more prevalent that becomes, in other words the more free you are to go wherever you need to be or learn whatever you need to learn puts a little bit of pressure, perhaps, on institutions at whatever level to really look at what they do and see if they are providing what people want. Not only do students have the options of going anywhere, but institutions have the option of getting students from anywhere. So, it increases the opportunity rather than limiting it, it seems to me.

Regina suggested there is a failure in higher education to differentiate between two distinct markets – the traditional undergraduate student and the older, more mature adult learner. According to Regina, higher education needs to realize that more adult learners are accessing higher education, and there are two different kinds of learners:

the student who sits there because they don't know what they want, and the older woman or student who is there because they have a purpose to learn and to better themselves. And that's why they're there. They're not there because somebody else is paying for it; they're paying for the degree.

Finally, Stella suggested higher education accept online learning programs offered by accredited, respected institutions as equal in quality to face-to-face programs offered by brick and mortar institutions. After reading comments on an academic listserv to which Stella subscribes, she noticed professors in various fields across the United States trying to dismiss online learning degree programs as inferior or useful only if no other alternative is available. Stella, on the other hand, agreed with comments made by some professors which were more supportive of online learning. She reflected:

Is it really the medium of delivery that determines the quality of the degree, or is it the quality of the instruction and the work and the grading and everything that goes into a degree, in general? To what extent, basically, does the medium matter? That's pretty much how I feel. I think if you have good professors who are working with good material, know their stuff, who are capable of teaching, yes there are certain adaptations in the form that they need to make, but the work's the work.

Expand Access to Higher Education. The women of this study voiced their hope that higher education will continue to offer more online degree programs to provide increased access and greater flexibility to those who may not be able to attend on-campus classes. They provided several justifications for this request:

- “As a society, we are trying to provide all students an opportunity to go to college,” Belle commented.
- Denise, a distance education director at a rural community college, observed administrators resist the notion of utilizing partially or fully online courses to free up classroom space, even when the college faces a shortage of such space.
- According to Meira, without increased online education opportunities, higher education may become exclusionary, as it was years ago.
- Dedra pointed out that two keys unlock education: 1) universities recognize that there is another population of students out there to be served, and 2) students engage in online learning. She added, “This isn’t a threat, it’s an opportunity!”
- Gillian suggested the bias among faculty or administrators against online doctoral programs offered by respected brick and mortar institutions is based upon lack of understanding of online education. “What people don’t understand creates bias. The academy is not wanting to give up the old systems.”
- Marion had this observation regarding the need for expanded access to higher education:

There is no traditional student; there are students coming to the college environment out of high school, there are students who are coming to college out of work situations, there are students who are coming to college with families, there are students who are coming to college without families, but there really is this myth of the traditional student.

- Diana is driving several hours per week to attend a traditional university so she can earn her Ph.D. She fears driving through construction-heavy sections of highway, and if she misses class, a fellow student has to fax a copy of the notes. She cannot help comparing this to her master's program. In the online program, all information was available online and there was no driving requirement. Diana emphasized, "If another university gets a doctorate online, I will definitely check into transferring."
- Alex suggested higher education simply wants to do business the way it always has been done.
- Paige's search for an online Ph.D. from a respected brick and mortar institution has led her to conclude that the decision makers are entrenched in the traditional format, "and they don't want that format to change. They're comfortable with it, they have power in it, they fear the shift . . . if they start transforming to the new system, and so it might be . . . change comes from the grass roots."

Support Quality in Online Education. The participants recommended higher education institutions oversee the quality within online programs, designate a contact person who will provide feedback and assistance to students, update technology and utilize it correctly, publicize online programs based on the reputation of the brick and mortar institution, and focus on the needs of the learner when designing online programs. Belle recommended that institutions take these steps to ensure quality:

Monitor online learning to ensure that the courses will meet quality standards.
Interaction has to be built into the development of the course, built into the

activities, the question in the discussion board, in the pacing of the course modules, in chats, and in the material being chunked in a way to engage people in concepts and activities.

Summary of Concern for Other Women

All participants of the study felt online education holds great potential for women to achieve goals, change their status, and gain self-confidence. They described how online education may provide solutions for women who want to alter their situations at work or at home, and they also expressed a desire to share their expertise about online education with other women.

Potential Solutions for Women. Women may earn an online degree without others knowing they are doing so; this could help a woman escape an abusive spouse or to leave a limiting job. “This is a way that you could almost, surreptitiously, if you wanted to, go to school. If you’re trying to find a way out of a situation, you could do it at home when your husband is at work, and he’d never know,” Denise observed. Women need more advanced online degrees in order to seek promotion and advancement. Kim spoke for many participants when she suggested women “tend to be lower paid, so we can’t quit our jobs or move our children to get more education.”

Alex noted that education is “giving women a sense of self-esteem or self-empowerment.” Marion felt higher education should do more to educate older women returning to college “of what kinds of skills and technology knowledge they need in order to be able to take the classes.” Flexibility in education is needed for women who

work full time and cannot relocate to earn a degree and for single parents. Gillian, however, commented that many women stifle their own capabilities and need help from educators in giving up social norms that prevent their participation in education.

Sharing Expertise with Other Women. The women of this study, beginning with Martha, requested the development of a support network comprised of women who have earned a fully online degree to offer support for women who are contemplating reentry to higher education by entering an online program. There was consensus among the women that information about online programs is not easy to locate, it is not in a central location, and university Web sites can be confusing and difficult to navigate. This is especially true, they said, of women who haven't been in school for a period of years. Martha commented, "Women need a place where they can ask questions without feeling intimidated." Stella wanted to participate in such a support network because "there are a lot of misconceptions about online education, and it doesn't seem like there is any kind of coordinated information sources out there for typical programs. So, it can be very hit or miss finding information about the different options available." Many of the participants in this study reiterated their interest in participating in such a support network if it is developed.

Summary of Excellent Online Instructors

Because the instructor is a vital component in the online environment, and is often the lifeline for students who are struggling to find time for course work, navigate within a technological environment, and overcome challenging in their lives, it is

beneficial to share what these women identified as characteristics of excellent online instructors.

Excellent Online Instructors. During the interview process, each participant was asked to list the characteristics of excellent online instructors. Responses of the participants are categorized in Table 9.

Selecting Online Instructors. The eighteen participants also made suggestions for higher education institutions to consider as the institutions struggle to select instructors who will be successful in teaching online courses. Before selecting someone to teach online, the suggested the institution:

- Put prospective online faculty through a chat where all interaction is online. A great deal can be learned about the mannerisms of a person when they communicate totally online.
- Test their knowledge of the field.
- Test how well they can take their knowledge and mannerisms and apply them to the online environment.
- Determine whether the faculty will allow students to interject their learning and expand on that. It is important for the learning to be personal and relevant to the students. Too many instructors are brilliant but don't want other opinions.

The women who participated in this study also noted that there were both professional and personal development outcomes that resulted from earning the master's degree. Professional development was predominantly measured by career and job opportunities, advancement, increased income, connectedness in a professional

TABLE 9
Characteristics of Excellent Online Instructors

<i>Communication</i> <i>Excellent online instructors...</i>	<i>Teaching Skills</i> <i>Excellent online instructors...</i>	<i>Course Design Skills</i> <i>Excellent online instructors...</i>
○ convey a lot of information very efficiently and in a very friendly manner; approachable; they not rude or condescending; they demonstrate a willingness to help students.	○ are able to envision what students are going to have to go through to learn what the instructor is trying to teach, which means students don't have to jump through unnecessary hoops.	○ have the skills to design a course so that it has an element of complexity that makes it challenging, and the student feels he or she has accomplished something by working through the maze of requirements, but not stupidly convoluted that...students become constantly disoriented by the expectations.
○ care about your success in the class.	○ have good writing skills.	○ create a course that is inviting and conveys passion for the subject.
○ indicate they value you as a student by their presence in the course and the nature of their feedback.	○ have knowledge of the field and hands-on experience in their field.	○ provide students advance organizers and a sequence of activities for what the student will encounter module by module.
○ are able to carry on a virtual conversation.	○ should have been an online student at some point.	○ will direct students rather than just measure them according to a rubric.
○ have compassion and can empathize with students. Sometimes technology doesn't work. People lead busy lives.	○ know how to prompt students with questions in the discussion board to re-engage them and take the discussion to a higher level.	○ design the learning to consider different learning styles and are adept at teaching to different learning styles.
○ realize there are no stupid questions and that smart people ask questions.	○ are willing to share their own experiences with online students.	○ require group work for projects and communication that promotes interaction.
○ respect our preconceptions and beliefs but try to expose us to things we haven't thought about before.	○ have the ability to share power, awareness that it needs to be done, and an acceptance of the awareness that it needs to be done.	○ know how to chunk material in such a way that it engages people in a meaningful way about a particular objective or concept.
○ are flexible, ready to respond to student needs.	○ are able to think ahead and be creative in putting together resources.	○ state benchmarks for their response to students.
○ understand how to build a sense of community and classroom in the online environment.	○ are willing to share their knowledge through synchronous as well as asynchronous discussions.	○ focus on the human aspect and student learning more than on the technology.
○ notify students when he or she will be out of contact for a designated period.	○ must be a good typist, most important in the synchronous activities of an online course.	○ understand how to build a sense of community and classroom in the online environment.
○ provide prompt feedback.	○ are highly organized.	
○ promote interaction among students and with the students.	○ know how to use the tools of the software so they can communicate well online.	
○ show enthusiasm and have a sense of humor.	○ model a willingness to learn.	
	○ are able to keep people on topic.	

community, and credibility among peers in their profession. Personal development included increased self-confidence, respect, and the strength to be a role model for others. These women also observed a domino effect in other people who emulated their behavior by seeking and earning an online degree, and they described changes in relationships with others after they completed the master's degree.

In spite of experiencing many positive gains from earning an online degree, a majority of the women of this study also shared how discrimination in the work place played a role in motivating them to gain more knowledge and skills in order to prove their capabilities and intellect. They either had experienced discrimination themselves in the work place, or they witnessed it happening to other women. The participants related having seen men with fewer years of experience and fewer credentials receive promotion, pay raise, recognition, or position based only on gender, and others related how men in a position of power and authority regularly took the ideas of women and portrayed them as their own. Only two women in the study said they had not experienced discrimination against women in their past experience; one was in a female-dominated profession and the other lived in a foreign country during her working career.

In addition, the women in this study unanimously issued a plea for change in higher education to eliminate barriers for women seeking education, expand access by providing more online educational offerings, and support quality in online education. Not only did these women ask for change in higher education, they volunteered to be part of a change structure and provide encouragement, support, and information to women who are seeking educational resources. Although the means for doing so has not

been developed, they asked to be considered as a resource for whatever mechanism of support might be put in place in the future.

The eighteen participants also provided detailed characteristics which they deem essential in excellent online instructors, and they made suggestions for higher education institutions grappling with the selection of instructors to teach online. Clearly, these women provided tangible evidence that all faculty are not prepared, or do not possess without some kind of training, the attributes required to lead an online course in a way that results in student success. As online education grows, and institutions select instructors to teach online courses, emphasis should be placed on the instructor's concern for interaction with students, knowledge of his or her field, ability to communicate in the online environment, respect for prior experience of learners, and willingness to allow students a role in making learning personal and relevant.

This research study might well have concluded here, but there were six participants whose lives were more significantly altered by their experience of earning an online degree, and the researcher felt the change was significant enough to elaborate on their experiences in a separate chapter – Chapter V: Transformational Change in Some Participants. These six participants, in addition to self-confidence, self-respect, credibility among peers, or new career opportunities, also experienced a degree of transformational change that led them to reassess their own personalities and their role in life. These six women openly accepted changes they discovered in themselves as a result of earning an online degree, even if it meant overcoming family resistance, moving to a

different location to start a new life, entering a Ph.D. program, or changing their marital status.

These six women, and the transformation in their lives, led the researcher to delve deeper into the literature related to significant learning, transformational change, symbolic growth experience, and self-actualization. The transformational change in these six women is detailed in the next chapter. Additionally, the heuristic self-search inquiry research methodology allowed the researcher to engage in self-reflection about the transformational change in her own life as a result of earning an online degree. This “I” perspective (Sela-Smith, 2002) of the researcher was added after extended engagement with both the research question and with participants in the study. Sela-Smith (2002) explained the importance of this aspect of the heuristic self-search inquiry method:

Validity of the research is established by surrendering to the process that is pushing itself into the consciousness of the researcher, allowing the process to unfold and then noticing results in expansion of self-awareness, deepening of self-understanding, and of self-transformation that others can experience in the “story.” (p. 79)

Maintaining an internal orientation on the part of the researcher is part of the heuristic self-search inquiry whereby “long-hidden tacit knowledge, suppressed, repressed, rejected, and feared by the individual, by social systems, and by humankind, may finally emerge” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 84). The transformational changes that resulted from

earning an online degree for six of the participants, and the researcher, are shared in Chapter V.

CHAPTER V

TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE IN SOME PARTICIPANTS

By significant learning I mean learning which is more than an accumulation of facts. It is learning which makes a difference in the individual's behavior, in the course of action he chooses in the future, in his attitudes and in his personality. It is a pervasive learning which is not just an accretion of knowledge, but which interpenetrates with every portion of his existence. (Rogers, 1961, p. 280)

After completing the online degree and looking back at their progress, a number of the participants in this study achieved the initial goals that led them to choose an online degree, but, in addition, they also recognized changes in their view of themselves and the world. For some, the change in their perspective led to dramatic changes in their actions and in the directions of their lives. All of the women experienced professional and personal growth, to some degree, as a result of new career opportunities, promotion, advancement, new connectedness with peers, or increased self-confidence. For a few of the women, however, the experience of earning the online master's degree became the catalyst for a new interpretation of who they were as a person and a revision of their role in life. These women experienced something greater than the expected learning.

For a few of these women, the learning promoted self-actualization and a dramatic shift in the participant's view of self and how she would design her role in life after the learning experience. Rogers (1961) specified changes in a person that may indicate self-actualization and significant learning:

1. The person comes to see herself differently.
2. She accepts herself and her feelings more fully.
3. She becomes more self-confident and self-directing. She becomes more the person she would like to be.
4. She changes in her basic personality characteristics, in constructive ways.

(Rogers, 1961, p. 280)

The dramatic, transformative change in some of the participants, as a result of their online learning experience, also aligned with the concept of The Symbolic Growth Experience (SGE) (Frick, 1983, 1987, 1990) which “refers to those significant moments in life when we create personal meaning by symbolizing our immediate experience in the interest of heightened awareness and personal growth” (Frick, 1987, p. 406). For them, the learning was a Symbolic Growth Experience, a “conscious perception of the symbolic-metaphorical dimension of immediate experience leading to heightened awareness, the creation of meaning, and personal growth” (Frick, 1990, p. 68). Self-reflection led these participants to a “vital learning experience” (Frick, 1987, p. 411) and the creation of “new symbolic forms and meaning. The major source of these symbolic transformations comes from a creative process within the person” (Frick, 1987, pp. 411-412).

For some participants, the learning became part of a newly developed self that was interwoven with the experience, illustrating that “when new symbolic forms emerge and new meaning is created, the Gestalt of the personality is changed. The previous pattern is altered in its dynamics and complexity” (Frick, 1987, p. 420). Frick (1987)

emphasized, “The symbolic growth experience becomes a profound learning experience and, therefore, a powerful catalyst for dynamic change and growth” (pp. 412-413).

All of the participants in this study acknowledged changes in their lives as a result of earning the degree. Most of them gained new confidence, self-respect, credibility among peers, or new career opportunities that were rewarding. However, a smaller number of the participants attached greater symbolic meaning to the experience. To these participants, the experience altered who they had become and the direction their future would take. They demonstrated:

- (1) an unexpected discovery leading to heightened personal awareness that resulted from the learning experience,
- (2) an openness to change and the process of becoming,
- (3) a willingness to overcome internal or external resistance in order to redefine self, and
- (4) a retrospective affirmation of altered personality and identity.

This integration of experience with personal identity went beyond acquisition of new employment, newly gained confidence to reinforce the pre-existing sense of identity, or a sense of accomplishment for attaining a personal goal. Rather, the experience was the impetus for an unexpected redefinition of self that was integrated with, and could not be severed from, the experience itself. This series of events was part of a “symbolic growth experience . . . a *creative moment* of learning emerging from the center of the experienced self” (Frick, 1987, p. 413). A synchronous convergence of forces, events,

and complex variables; “the environmental events and the internal forces . . . gave birth to some significant transformation of the personality” (Frick, 1990, p. 69).

A group of women in this study emerged from the master’s degree with a revised interpretation of self; the experience transformed their previous self-perceptions and led to newly developed personal meaning (Frick, 1987, p. 408). It was not possible for these women to have foreseen the level of change that would occur within themselves as a result of their learning. In “symbolic growth experience learning, the stimulus events themselves do not in some a priori manner dictate the response but offer up the raw material for symbolic transformation and discovery” (Frick, 1987, p. 411). The dramatic level of change was a result of the “uncanny convergence of the forces and events at such a propitious moment in the life of the individual” (Frick, 1990, p. 69).

As part of the transformative process, these women embraced what they sensed they were becoming, thus facilitating the elevated discovery and change process within themselves. Although the acceptance of change led to varying degrees of life-altering decisions, in retrospect these women affirmed the altered interpretations of self, and their newly adopted choices and behaviors, as authentic responses (Frick, 1987, p. 413). Learning has the inherent potential to ignite within the recipient transformational change if accompanied by readiness for change, discovery of new personal meaning in the learning experience, and willingness to overcome resistance to ensuing personal change. Within some of the participants in this study, willingness to act upon symbolic discovery, deepened by self-reflection, led to a complex level of learning that resulted in

“significant conceptual shifts, the creation of meaning, and, ultimately, to a higher level of personal integration” (Frick, 1990, pp. 70-71).

Figure 2 illustrates several theoretical underpinnings critical to understanding the transformation of women in this study. Most significantly, however, is the alignment of the learning experiences and resulting outcomes among this group of women with the goals of transformational learning theory: self-emancipation through self-understanding and self-knowledge, the overcoming of systematically induced distorted communication and perceptions, and the strengthening of the capacity for self-determination and autonomy through rational discourse (Mezirow, 2000; Moore, 2005). Self-discovery and self-knowledge took place in some of the women of this study more so than in others, and that heightened personal awareness was unanticipated prior to the learning experience. As a result, these women made a decision to embrace, rather than reject, the change in their perception of self and their current state of being. They embarked on a journey of becoming, a journey of critical reflection during which time they discarded old assumptions and redefined the way they related to former definitions of self and other people.

Through self-determination, these women overcame significant resistance to the transformation occurring in their lives – resistance from without, which was embodied by the persons closest to them, and resistance from within, embodied by the old self questioning a dynamic ontological shift and unprecedented courses of action. In retrospect, these women applauded their decisions to seek autonomy and independent

INDICATORS OF SIGNIFICANT LEARNING AND TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

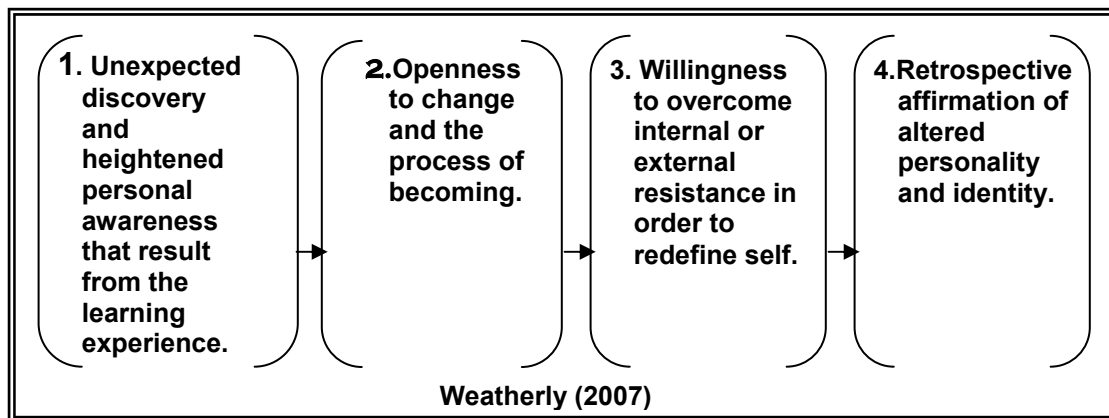
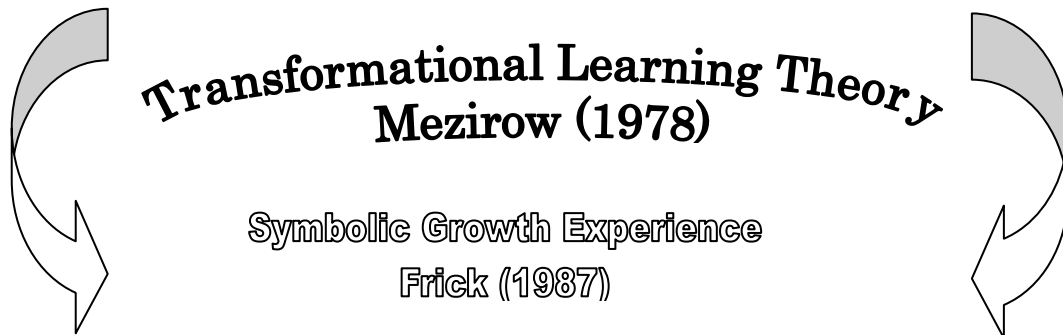
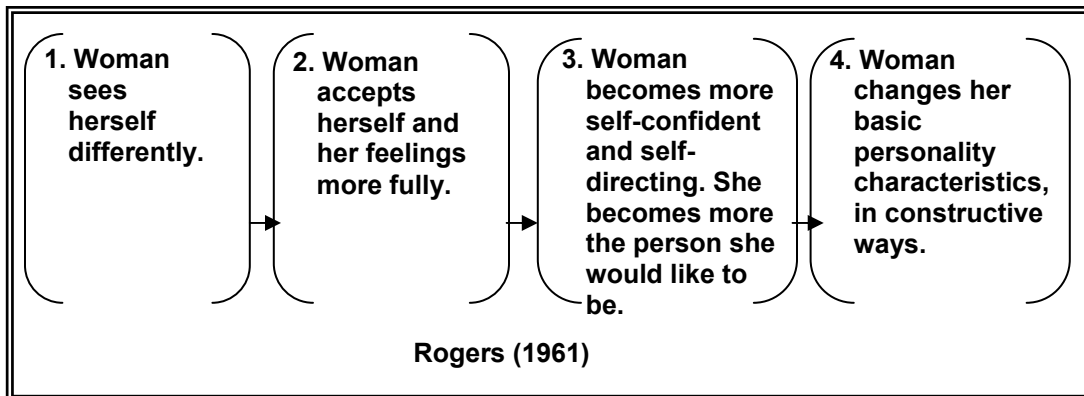


Figure 2
Indicators of Significant Learning and Transformational Change

thought and action. Selected discoveries and subsequent actions of these women are categorized in this section highlighting each participant and her individual experience as follows: 1) unexpected discovery and heightened personal awareness, 2) openness to change and the process of becoming, 3) willingness to overcome internal or external resistance to redefine self, and 4) retrospective affirmation of altered personality and identity.

Marion

The interview with Marion was to be the first by desktop video conference. Our attempt at a face-to-face interview was thwarted by her travel demands, so we opted to try a video conference. I shipped a newly purchased Web camera to her, she set it up, and then we had a test. It failed. I could hear Marion, but I couldn't see her. No matter what we tried, we couldn't get the video to work. So, we decided to fall back on more trusted technology – the telephone. I called Marion between her many appointments and put my tape recorder near the speaker phone on my desk. Her voice came through clearly, so we began the interview.

Not seeing Marion, I had no idea what she looked like. Her voice was rich and melodious, like a singer's, and I relaxed as she began sharing her experience of earning an online degree. Her motivation to get a master's degree was job related, or, more accurately, required for her job. She said she lived in a rural area where there were no institutions providing the degree needed, so she searched the Internet and found an institution that offered the degree online. She enrolled in a program at a university

located in another state, but her employer paid all costs so she didn't worry about the out-of-state tuition rate. Marion described how she met friends in the online classes and was given an opportunity to advance herself without the challenges of a commute. Since she was teaching at a college full time and had two small children at home, Marion took only one course each semester. This meant it took her five years to complete the degree, so the coursework and balancing family simply became a part of her lifestyle. She had a great deal of support from her husband and her students.

Marion gained credibility in her students' eyes because she was a student herself and could tell them she was doing work just as they were doing work. Earning the degree changed the viewpoints of her children and broadened their educational possibilities. Marion was conscientious about balancing her commitments in order to make sure her family didn't suffer as a result of her education. She even had a third child during the degree program, and her classmates were never aware of that fact. The degree affirmed to Marion that she was a person who could think outside the box, that she could complete the process, and she could do it while balancing her family. "That was very liberating for me," she said.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

Through the process of earning the degree, Marion came to see herself differently and discovered within herself greater potential and capability than she ever dreamed she possessed. She related to me on the telephone:

As a transformation, I guess, for me it was completing that and seeing it get done and knowing that it could be done. It was a very liberating thing to say, “Gosh, if I can do this, I can do x, y, and z, and I don’t have to sacrifice myself as a mother and not do things that help enhance my professional growth because I don’t think there’s time, or I don’t think that in some way I’m sabotaging my children’s youth.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

When I asked Marion to name the most important outcome of the online degree, she said it was self-respect. Completing the online master’s degree proved to be a trajectory for completing a Ph.D. because Marion found the anonymity of the online environment to be “a tremendously freeing environment.” No one in her class, nor her advisors and instructors, knew until the defense of her thesis that she was an African-American woman. About her race, Marion said:

I had never tried to reveal and kept that hidden because I didn’t want that to color, in any way, anybody’s interactions with me and probably to this day there are probably some students that have no clue that I’m African American, and it makes no difference to them because they interacted with me based on what I had to offer in the class and my intellect versus what I look like, and so it was a tremendously freeing environment to be as intellectually challenging and as challenged as I wanted to be and to call people on things and not have them say, “Well, you’re just saying that because you’re Black.” Or, “You’re just saying

that because you're a woman." They could actually look at the arguments and analyze them based on the fact that they're argument. I think it made a difference in how I was perceived in the classroom. Could I pinpoint it? Could I say my grades were different as a result? No, I can't, but I know because my voice is ethnically neutral, I guess you could say, that I've been able to open doors for myself, and I've been able to do things that I wouldn't have been able to do had I met somebody face-to-face, and it's a shame that that still operates even today, but people unconsciously make choices and decisions and if you ask them consciously they'll deny it until they're blue in the face, but it does still happen.

When Marion told me her story, I was stunned and thrilled at the same moment. I knew I was talking to someone whose life had been altered because she discovered strength within herself that would enable her to fully become herself as a result of learning in the online environment.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

Marion faced resistance within her own family when she began earning her advanced degree. Her voice took on a note of sadness as she related:

Some in my own family won't acknowledge the degree. They act as though it is something a mother should not do. Getting past that is important; it is important to know what earning an education does for my family. I am doing something that no one else in my family has done. Nobody asks how school's going, nobody asks how your research is going, nobody dares. And, I had to finally

realize that it really didn't have anything to do with me and everything to do about other people and when they looked at me the reflection that they were seeing of their own inadequacies or the opportunities that they didn't seize or the excuses that they made as to why they didn't do x, y, and z and how hard that was for them to be able to acknowledge that in their own lives, and so what I'm getting is projected anger. They think I'm ego-tripping.

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

In retrospect, Marion affirmed the person she had become. She said, "I think I learned from the master's environment that I could be, that I had accomplished something, and that meant something in the academic environment." She overcame resistance to her new identity from members of her own family and entered a Ph.D. program. Her voice was excited as she described her area of research:

My dissertation research is really looking at narrative as a tool in being able to develop digital communities and how story telling and this particular device that I'm building and methodology really help people connect in an online environment, so I'm really taking it one step further and saying, "Okay, if you have this online classroom, that's one thing, but how do you really build a learning community online and what does that look like? And, my theory is that looking at narrative is the way to be able to develop that.

It was obvious to me that Marion's life was intertwined with her online master's experience. She wasn't the same person as the one who entered the degree, and her life's

work, her research, was pointed toward gaining a better understanding of the learning environment that provided her new direction. She walked a different path than others in her family, and for that she received their “projected anger.” Marion acknowledged pain from this, and she recognized the anger was primarily from the women in her family. She reasoned that their anger had more to do with her serving as a reminder of what they could have done, but didn’t do, to reach their own goals. She explained:

In pursuing my own goals like that I was holding a mirror up to other people of all the things they had not accomplished in their own lives and reminding them of those things, and so that is why it became very hard for them to acknowledge what I was doing because then it would bring up what they hadn’t done for themselves and all the excuses that come along with it. And, so, in my mind it’s both of those things, it’s cultural – having never been there before – and it’s also a very personal reminder that we all make choices and sometimes we have to live with those choices.

On the day of our telephone interview, Marion was planning the defense of her dissertation and preparing to interview for a new job. The online master’s degree, and the subsequent Ph.D., led Marion to feel she and her children would have a better future because of her accomplishments. Marion said she found that “the mother’s educational attainment really drives the children’s goals and objectives. And so if the mother has attained high degrees, the children also will follow in those footsteps.”

Dedra

To meet with Dedra, I traveled to a thriving cultural center of intellectual and artistic creativity – a city with a thriving artistic community of painters, sculptors, authors, and those gifted in cuisine. Tourists were plentiful, and I asked myself how I had missed this lovely city in the past. I was thankful my research uncovered such a treasure; the city emanated grace and charm. In order to locate Dedra’s home, I had to drive away from the city, and, as I drove along the coast, I found myself relaxing. The sea always has a tranquilizing effect on me, and this particular day was sunny, warm, and calm. I turned into a secluded subdivision of large beach homes that curved along the street and hugged close to one another, as if cloistering together might protect them from hurricane force winds. I parked on the street level and began climbing steps that would take me to the elevated porch and front entry of the house. As I started to knock, Dedra quickly opened the door and welcomed me into a house that was like an extension of the sandy seaside with brilliant white floors, walls, and counter tops. We settled into comfortable chairs situated in a side room lined on one side with floor to ceiling windows. Dedra’s hospitality depicted the same culture I had sensed in the city near her, and within minutes she made me feel as though I was an important guest in her home.

Dedra began to share with me the years she spent in an elementary school supporting technology in the classroom. Her excitement in utilizing technology for learning was coupled with a sense of frustration at the frequent use of hardware and software for mind-numbing, mundane tasks. Dedra witnessed this daily in the school, and, in her mind, she knew there had to be a more worthwhile use of the technology. She

searched for a more meaningful experience for the students and repeatedly thought to herself:

They need to use these tools to help them learn those other things. And, they don't need to come here just to learn computer skills, but they need to learn those in order to do whatever they have to do in order to learn in their academic subject.

Dedra approached her online master's degree with optimism. Because she had never learned in the online modality before, Dedra said of herself, "I wasn't gun shy. It was like being in a candy store." As she began the master's program, Dedra began to gain a sense of confirmation that her questions about the status quo had been on target:

The more I took, the more sense it made and the more I knew I could trust my own observations and my own instincts about it and whether they ever bought into it or not, I knew I was right, I knew I was on the right track. And, so...it was like the dawn came up, like the sun came up. I thought, "This makes perfect sense!" You know, this is why it needs to work this way.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

Dedra began to notice changes within herself as she completed classes on the Internet. She applied the learning to her own school environment, and she came to appreciate the power of collaboration as she began to initiate collaborations between teachers. The enormous amount of reflection required in the online program often caused her to cry after class and come to grips with herself in a way she never had before:

It became really a powerful learning experience for me in, I guess, reflection. Thinking before you speak, or being aware of all the subtext that's going on in those exchanges that I found I could transfer to the teachers that I'm working with on a personal face-to-face basis. I became more attuned to looking for those other kinds of cues, and it was surprising to me, but I became more aware of that and more deliberate. It's okay to just pause and deliberate on what the next step is going to be. So, that was something else big that I learned that was completely aside from the content. And, it obviously, since I'd always gone to school with somebody up there lecturing, was not something I think I ever would have learned in a regular classroom setting.

The reflection led to innovations in the use of technology with the teachers and students, but there was a growing frustration with her local school administrators and their lack of vision:

I got so frustrated with a dysfunctional administration who simply couldn't see. And, you know, we'd come in every August and the machines would be down, the network would be down, it would be a new software that nobody knew, there'd be a new operating system that nobody knew, there'd be new logins that nobody was told, or one year, twenty percent of the year was gone before all the machines in my lab were functioning. That shouldn't be. But, it was like, well, you know, I'm keeping the network going, well you know, don't bother me. So, teachers and students were never put first in the decision-making. So, in 2001, Sept. 11, 2001, after that I started thinking, "Is this ever really going to change?"

And, the day I realized it's not going to change no matter what I go through to try to prove to them that I'm doing a good job and I need this and this and this to help us all get better, I realized they want it this way, and it's not going to change, because this is the way they want it. You know, it's not like they are just fumbling around and haven't seen the light, yet. They don't want it to change. So, I quit. (laughter). I just, I thought, this, I'm doing a really good job, and I can do a better and better and better job, and nothing's going to change. They're just going to say, "Thank you a lot, and we'll write this up, and we'll, you know . . ."

But it needed something different, and it wasn't rewarding to me. So, I spent that winter finishing up the degree, and the thing is, at graduation, all the teachers have to wear their robes, and most of the teachers had master's degrees, which I didn't, and I always felt so bad, and so I got my hood, but I didn't have a graduation to go to, and that was a lesson I had to learn about what was valuable in life.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

As Dedra faced a crossroads in her professional life, she also came to a decision in her personal life, both of which she attributed to the new confidence she had gained through the online program:

So, so that was the year of my divorce, which was also another . . . but, but the thing was, you see, that the more I learned that I could trust my own instincts, and the more I realized that what 90 percent of my life was telling me was that I

was smart and capable and energetic and creative, but what had been the majority of what my husband had been telling me, which was that I wasn't any of those things, suddenly I began thinking, "Now, wait a minute. The preponderance of evidence is on this side now, maybe I don't need to listen to you, anymore. I don't need that negativity in my life." And so, it was like, I'm not doing this. And, you know, the day I realized I could wear a different pair of shoes, I just didn't have to do this anymore, was wonderfully liberating, and I've never been happier. But, I tell people, "I spent the first ten years trying to be perfect and the second ten years wondering why I wasn't and the last ten years figuring out that I didn't have to be, that I was just fine the way I was." And, part of that learning was this degree program because that was something my husband knew absolutely nothing about. He is a physician. A pathologist. So, you know, he knew a lot about a lot of things, but technology was not one of them at all. So, that was something that was completely mine, a hundred percent mine, and he couldn't critique it, but he could and he did, but he had no grounds. You know, I didn't have to believe him. And, so, it was a life changing experience in that personal way, as well, because I realized I was really a whole lot more talented than I had ever been given the chance to be. And, it's nice, it's a nice feeling.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

Although she never became emotional as she related her experiences, Dedra shared that the online degree resulted in change and transformation that led to freedom

and independence personally as well as professionally. She divorced her husband and moved into her beach-side home.

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

Now, teaching online courses for an accredited public university in another state, she sits in the comfort of her home and engages in professional development in higher education, something she always wanted to do but didn't acknowledge until earning the online degree. The autonomy she gained through earning the online degree was not something she could have gotten in an "on-ground" degree, she said, adding:

I am a very introverted kind of person. I don't need to sit in a classroom with my buddies. The setting is either an enhancement or a distraction. There is no distraction online. It was a connected experience. I grew up, finally.

Paige

As I left the interstate and began to wend my way through small mountain communities in a beautiful, yet remote region of the country, the flora changed dramatically. Spruce and fir towered above the smaller trees along the road, gracing the landscape with their elegant foliage, yet in the summer they seemed unadorned without snow on their thick, green branches. Ferns crouched beneath trees, and the road rose higher in the mountains. It was surprising, then, when I arrived in a small, remote town of relatively few buildings to discover Paige's picturesque university campus tucked away in a grove of trees.

I walked among the majestic old buildings that were supported by spectacular columns. One of the buildings matched the description Paige gave me as the one in which her office was located, so I went inside and began climbing the stairs to reach the second floor. As I reached the top of the stairs, Paige and I spotted one another. She struck me as very professional, dressed in black attire and having short, neatly styled blonde hair, and she welcomed me into her small office that had an inviting view of the well-manicured campus below. I arranged my tape recorder on a corner table between us, then Paige began sharing with me her thoughts on having earned a fully online master's degree.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

Paige reflected on how online learning changed her:

As an introvert in a classroom, I communicate much better when writing. I was excellent online. I felt like I had been underachieving up to that point. When I look back on it, I realize it elevated me to a higher level. I self-actualized by getting the degree.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

After earning the master's degree, Paige was hired to teach at a rather elite private university. She began working with students from all over the world and conducting research that is international in scope. Although her family has been resistant to both her decision to earn the degree and the time she now spends conducting research,

Paige is adamant that this is part of her identity. “I am very happy with the research I am doing. Without the Internet, none of this would have happened. The degree led to this research and my meeting people in other countries. I might have traveled to Europe, but not in this role.”

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

Paige made the decision to pursue the online master’s degree despite resistance from her family. After moving to a new state to accommodate her husband’s career goals, she analyzed her situation and decided to reinvent herself and begin a new career. She described this decision:

Being in the online program helped me build my confidence because of the fact that I mentioned before that I really felt like I was just a stay at home mom all of a sudden. Where I was a confident professional, I’m now a stay at home mom. And, I’m trying to come up with a new identity in an entirely new place. Who am I going to be?

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

Paige is now ready to begin a Ph.D., but her family’s strong sentiment, her heavy involvement in research, and her somewhat remote location demands the flexibility of an online program. She is waiting for a fully accredited, public institution to offer the Ph.D. degree she needs in the online format. As Paige described her transformation through the online learning experience, she emphasized this enabling factor: “All judgments are left

behind, and you are left with just the pure mind-to-mind communication.” The affirmation she now gives herself, after having completed the degree and acquiring a teaching position at a university, is evident in this description:

I was excellent online in my classes. And, there were professionals from all over the world in the class with me, and I was just as good, or even better, than they were. And, this was fantastic, and totally built my confidence and gave me a new life to start out on.

Diana

I drove two days to reach Diana for a face-to-face interview. When I arrived in her city, the entire area looked impoverished; many of the signs and billboards lining the streets were written in another language. Diana met me in the parking lot outside the portable building that housed her office. There were no windows in the portable building, and I noticed that she telephoned someone to reassure them that she wasn't talking to me about a job. I sensed she was nervous about what they might think, and then I realized again the poverty of the area and knew she could not risk losing her job.

As soon as the interview began, I realized that I was correct in my assumption that Diana was very cautious about maintaining her job. She shared the reasons that led her to earn an online master's degree, but in the conversation, Diana revealed why she felt if she could earn a bachelor's and master's degree, “anybody can do it.” Diana told how in years past, when her two children were much younger, she suffered terrible physical abuse from her husband. The abuse went on until one evening when her

husband picked her up by her long hair, whirled her around the room, and then flung her against a wall. He pulled the telephone from the wall and beat her on the head with the base of the telephone. When she dropped to the floor, he grabbed a pot of coffee from the stove, flung the scalding liquid on her, then walked out of the house and into the garage to work on his car. At that moment, Diana related how she made a decision to seek help:

Luckily it got on my blue jeans, it didn't hurt me too bad, but when he walked out, I just got up, and I went, and I took a bath, and I thought, "That's it. If I'm living out of a dumpster, it's got to be better than this." And, the next morning I got up, and I left.

Diana got custody of her children and began working multiple jobs. She described their deplorable living conditions and how she was able to begin her education:

And, so I went down, and I enrolled in a university, and I started getting financial aid left and right, you know, started applying for things, and I got my degree. I was working five jobs. I remember that; I was working five jobs. I had two small children, but I got that first degree, and that was all it took. We lived in an apartment with rats. There were rats that just crawled across our bed at night. People wouldn't talk to us; they wouldn't have anything to do with us. We didn't have anything, but I knew if I could just get a college degree I can make it. If I could just get a college degree. I had one year of college behind me. And, little by little, you know, people would help. But, I guess one of my favorite stories is I was at the end of my rope, and my ex-husband had been trying to kill me all

weekend because I guess he couldn't understand why I wanted a divorce. So, it was ten o'clock at night, I was laying in the middle of the floor, I couldn't sleep because, you know, you worry about everything, and the kids were already in bed. We had one bedroom, but there was a knock on my door, and I thought, "It's ten o'clock at night, it's got to be him, you know, he's coming back for more. And, so I didn't answer, I didn't answer, and in a minute I hear this voice that says, "Diana." And, I thought, "That sounded like a woman's voice." And so, I got up and I said, "Yeah." She said, "You don't know me, but Jeannie sent me, or Jeannie told me about you." I heard the name Jeannie. So, I went out there, and you know the chain on the door, I opened the chain, and I could see this woman standing there, so I thought, "Okay, well, you know, it's a woman, so she's not going to do anything." So, I opened the door, and there's this woman standing there with these two bags of groceries, and I said, "Yes." She said, "My name is Margaret, and I'm a friend of Jeannie's. May I come in?" And I said, "Yeah." So, she came in and she sat these things on the floor. We didn't have anything else. She just sat them on the floor. And, I looked, and there were groceries in there. And of course, I think at that point I was kind of in shock – I'm seeing this, and I'm not really connecting to what's going on, but, all I know is that she was a friend of Jeannie's. Then, behind her walks this guy, then I got scared for a minute. She said, "This is my husband, Brian." And, so he, too, was carrying these bags and bags of groceries, and they sat them down. And, then, I think I said thank you, but I was just like, "Okay." And, then off they went. They

just left. And, I'm looking, and it's so funny because I picked up a roast, and we had been eating nothing, I mean like rice and beans, and that's all we would eat. We would have mayonnaise sandwiches, you know, because I made \$3.00 a year too much to qualify for food stamps. Three dollars a year. So, I called the kids, and I was hugging this roast. I will never forget as long as I live, I was hugging the roast. I said, "Look!!" They just started to open stuff, eating it. It was just amazing. But, anyway, Jeannie, this friend of mine, I worked with her at one of my jobs. And, they were on a bowling league together, her and this woman. And, they were out bowling, whatever night of the week that was, they were out bowling, and this woman worked in the back of the day care where they had my kids, and Jeannie told her about the kids. And Margaret said, "Yeah, that's them. They're always hungry. Doesn't she ever feed them? They act like they're starving!" And Jeannie said, "They probably are starving. They don't have any money. They're very poor, they're very poor." And, Jeannie told me later, Margaret just put down her bowling ball, and off she went. That instant, she just put down her ball and went to a grocery store and bought us all these groceries. A stranger. And, you know, things like that get me through. And, I think, if everyone would just do one little thing, we could make a world of difference.

Diana decided to dedicate her efforts outside the classroom to helping women in shelters. She related her passion for working with these women:

They need help. They need help, and no one helps them. And, so many times, if people would just . . . people don't know what a difference they made when they

looked at me and they smiled. And, there are so many women and children the people that work like you and me that are dressed like you and me they see people like that, they won't talk to them, they won't look at them because they might lose their power. And, it doesn't matter who you are now, or what you've become, and a lot of people that look at me like that, I think, "You know, you started off at this level and you're here. I started off here, and I'm here." But, I think people like that are just insecure about themselves.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

After Diana earned her bachelor's degree, she became a teacher, and her decision to earn an online master's degree was influenced by the fact that she had two children, one in elementary, one in middle school, and she wanted to spend as much time with them as possible. Diana related how she began to change as a result of the master's degree:

When I was going through the master's online, and that was the first time that I ever saw the Web site, when I went to the Web site, I was just blown away, I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I can see everything! I know exactly what's expected. I know where I'm going." It was just phenomenal. Plus, the interactive links. Plus, remember those tests we used to take? That was just amazing. And, so, it changed me in that, it's like I became a better student. I became a more intrigued student. Where it was like, "What more can I do?" And, I guess that's what we want from our kids, to make them want to learn, to make them want to be little

sponges. But, that's what I found as opposed to, "Okay, I'm going to go to class, I'm going to sit there, I'm going to take notes, do my work, and I'm done." But, when it's online, and there are links, there are doors to other, I mean, learning to me now, I've told my kids a million times, I won't live long enough to learn everything I want to learn because there's so much information out there. And, I think that is one thing that the online degree, I just love to learn, and I just love that everything is at my fingertips.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

Diana became more and more excited about learning, and she began to not only feel more confident in her abilities as a learner but also willing to share her new knowledge with teachers at her school:

Once I could see what was available, then I, I think of myself as someone who wants to learn, anyway, but once I could see what was out there, I wanted to learn even more, and I couldn't learn fast enough. And, as a result, I guess the change that happened in me has trickled down through my teachers.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

As Diana completed the masters' degree, she gained credibility and responsibility in the school district, and she advanced to an administrative role. Although this was a benefit in many ways, Diana felt there was an attitude of superiority associated with administration that conflicted with her life mission of helping those less fortunate than

herself. Diana shared how earning the master's degree brought her to a level within the administration that carried with it the expectation that she would remove herself from the very work she felt dedicated to complete:

And, I thought for a long time, that's why I'll never be a superintendent or a principal because I am not going to carry myself in those circles. And, I've had administrators tell me, "You can't hang out with secretaries. You can't be seen talking to these people. You can't do this. You can't be with just the teachers. You are up here now. You're one of us." And, I can't do that. If I can't help everyone, I'm getting out. I want to be in the gutters with my sleeves rolled up making a difference. (crying) I'm sorry. I want to make a difference when there's a woman who's been battered and beaten and she doesn't have any help, I want to be the one who picks her up and says, "You can do it!" I mean, I want to be there and say, "If I can do it, anybody can do it. Anybody!" And, nobody's helping them. And, yeah, we have the programs, we have the food stamps and welfare and all that, but they're still second-class citizens. You know, don't give them a hand-out. I want to build centers with computers, bring them in and show them, "Look. Get on. Learn. Get a degree. Get online. You can do this! And, people are donating clothes all the time. Come on, let's get a make over, fix you up, you know, stand up straight, carry yourself." But they don't have the skills. They don't have the skills.

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

Diana's future was altered by her online master's degree. Now, as she volunteers in women's shelters, she has a clearer plan for helping women gain skills that will enable them to earn an online degree and transform their lives:

My passion is single and abused women and empowering them. And, if they're single, we don't want them to leave their kids. The kids have already been traumatized enough. We want them at home with the kids. But, if we can get them with the computer where they can get an online degree to better their lives, why not? Why not do that?

When asked if her goals had changed, Diana said, "No, my goals have always been the same. Well, I mean, well, yes. I've always wanted to help people, but now, I think technology is a part of it." Although her dedication to her work with battered women is the same, Diana has redefined herself as an educator based largely on what she learned through the online experience, and that change will affect those she teaches, whether in public school or in a women's shelter. She described her new approach to teaching and learning:

I think it changed my whole philosophy of education because before that particular degree, I thought alternative education was learning centers or maybe doing a science experiment once a week. After the online degree, first of all, I learned as a student, you've got to have those resources, you've got to have the multitude of resources besides just the textbook. That's when I got really turned off of textbooks. Secondly, I think it's important that the information literacy,

and the best way I know how to explain it is the job I'm doing right now, technology specialist, I don't think it existed when I was in high school, and, if we're going to prepare them, we have to teach them how to learn and how to be resourceful and how to think. We can't prepare them for a job, because we don't know what is going to be out there when they're out there. We just have to prepare them for their time in the world. And, what getting that degree online did for me was to help me realize that I can't take everything in my head and put it into their head. And, it's not about me, the teacher. It's not about how elaborate I can make my plans; it's about them. What are they doing? What are they learning? How can they present this? Okay? Ben Franklin . . . am I going to lecture for three hours on an overhead? Or, am I going to say, "You tell me. Use whatever technology it takes. If you want to use video, make a movie about his life, do whatever. It just totally changed my philosophy of education. It went from, "I'm the teacher, and I'm going to teach you," to "You're the student, and this is your world."

Gillian

Gillian was bringing her youngest daughter to a university that was 140 miles from me, so I structured the interview around her trip. I drove to the hotel where she was staying, and we met in the lobby before going to her room for the two-hour interview. Gillian told me that five years earlier she had brought her older daughter to the same university, and it was during that trip that she became interested in an online master's degree. When

Gillian sat through the orientation with her daughter, and she learned more about the field her daughter was pursuing, she thought, “What a great way to help people; I’d like to do something like this.” So, she returned to her home state, found a job closely related to the field, and was told when she submitted her application, “You know, I think you’d be great in that job, but everybody in our department has at least a master’s. We will not hire you without that.” So, Gillian thought, “I’ve got to get a master’s. This job will be open again someday.”

Although Gillian lived only 35 miles from a major university, she quickly realized the institution “did not accommodate distant students . . . the university offered nothing either at a distance or weekends or something that would fit in with a working woman’s schedule. They did not offer anything along those lines.” Gillian could not quit her job or move since she still had a daughter in junior high school, so she began investigating the Web site of the institution her older daughter was attending. She found information there about the online master’s degree in the field she wanted, and for her:

That was the decisive moment. And, it was from there that I figured, “Okay, I’ve got to take the GRE.” I went out and bought some books to study for it. You know, a lot of it was very internal. It was like I just knew the path I had to take. I knew I had to go to school. I knew I couldn’t do it on campus because I wasn’t willing to move my family or to quit my job, I couldn’t quit my job. And, so, it was just like I just knew the steps to go. The web site said you had to take a GRE; I said, “Okay, I’ll figure out how to take the GRE.” The web site said you need transcripts. Okay, I went and figured out how to get my transcripts sent.

Web site said you needed to submit this, this, and this for the application. Okay, I did that. It was all very well lined out. I didn't need external instruction or the advisor saying do this and this. I was doing this while I was asking her questions about the program.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

For Gillian, the decision to enroll in the online program cemented the realization that she needed to earn more education, and it ultimately led her to develop a passion for online learning. Gillian said, "I fell in love with online learning and helping adults. I was very tentative of the first class, as most people are, but learning to adapt and learning to love distance education were the results of my experience."

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

Progression through the master's program led to even greater changes within Gillian. She was smiling and enthusiastic as she shared with me her experience:

How I changed with my master's, the main thing was learning to love online learning. I mean I had never encountered it in any manner, shape or form before my master's degree, and I was very tentative with my first class, like most people will be. I had never used WebCT before. I hadn't relied completely on email as a communication means. So, the change was learning to adapt and then learning to love. And, it wasn't learning to love it; it was almost an instant love affair between me and learning asynchronously because my master's was delivered

completely asynchronous. And, I took some good classes, I took some poorly designed classes, but, yet, even the poorly designed classes were still great in the fact that I'm an early morning person, I like to go to bed about 10:00 and get up about 4:00. The house is quiet, the phone's not ringing, my family's not bothering me. That fit in great with asynchronous online learning. It fit in great with that, then around 6:30 or so I'd hop in the shower, get ready for work, and then I could still do some work on the classes when I got home from work. Through the process, I decided I never really want to be back in a face-to-face classroom. I just enjoy, I'm very much a lone ranger, in a lot of ways, so this fit my personality, too.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

Gillian realized after entering the online master's program that there are some who would diminish the credibility of her degree simply because it was conducted online. Even though she recognized that such bias existed, it did not prevent the online master's degree from becoming the catalyst that propelled Gillian toward an online doctoral program offered by a fully accredited, well-known and respected brick and mortar institution. Gillian spoke openly about this resistance to accepting online degrees in various forms:

There's bias out there, both my master's and my doc have been delivered at a distance. I know it won't be accepted everywhere, but I'm hoping because of my accomplishments and my willingness to talk about it and my willingness to show

them what can be done, I'll help break down some of those biases. I know they're there. I'm going into a field that's very male-centric. Some schools are offering things via distance, some aren't, and I've also got a bias against an Ed.D. versus a Ph.D. I've done the same thing any Ph.D. student has done, but, within my field there is some bias against an Ed.D. I submitted a paper to one of the conferences; I got the reviewer's critique sheet, and just in the comments part, my paper was fine, they said, and I was talking about an online doctorate degree, they wrote and they said, "In our department we'll never hire anybody with an Ed.D. who got it at a distance." And, I thought, "Okay, just you wait buddy, you haven't met me, yet." But, it was blatant, and they had no idea who I was, of course, because it was a blind review, so I know the bias is out there. So, we've got to fight that. And, I'm just the one who will get it started. It's like, don't discount me because of my gender, don't discount me because it's an Ed.D. versus a Ph.D., don't discount me because I got it at a distance because I'll stack up our program against any program. Discount me because I may not have the skill set you're looking for, but give me a shot if you think I've got the skill set you need, and don't consider those other things, and I'll fight for that type of equality 'till the day I die. That's what distance education has done for me, and that's what I think it can do for other women, too. But, to make a statement like that, it has to be in their personality to do it. Some women aren't going to be willing to fight the battle. You know, the battle against gender bias isn't everybody's battle.

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

Gillian became more confident in her love of education, love of adult learning, and desire to pursue a doctorate. It had not been her dream prior to earning the master's degree. She said her initial reason for beginning the online master's program was to get a better job, but in the process, she became passionate about her desire to gain the credentials to teach adults in higher education. More importantly, the master's degree gave Gillian the self-confidence to pursue her dreams:

It gave me entry to my doctorate program. Its initial outcome was to get a better job, or that was the initial desire. When I started my master's, I never was even considering a doctorate. It instilled a passion for higher education. That's the most important outcome of my master's. And, it gave me the tools to do it through online learning. I want to work with adults through higher ed or a corporate setting. I want to work with adults; I see a need there. I want to do it with distance education. Higher education would be my first choice, but I'm not going to rule out anything else.

Gillian's daughters told her, "Reach for your dreams, Mama, reach for your dreams." Her response to their encouragement was an affirmation of herself and the transformative potential of education:

I believe in the possibilities. That's the one thing I've tried to teach my girls because there is still stereotypical gender bias out there still, but I've taught them that if you keep your eyes open and you look at all the opportunities out there,

they could take you in a direction you've never dreamed. Don't limit yourself!
Be open to everything!

Stella

Stella was my last interview, and I thought prior to the telephone call, "After interviewing seventeen women who have had such varied experiences, surely this interview will not be unique." I was wrong. As with every other participant, Stella was unique as a person and unique in her encounter with online education. Stella described her experience as transformational because her life had been dramatically changed by her earning a master's degree. The most important aspects of that transformation were the internal changes Stella underwent, all of which were unexpected and unanticipated.

At the time of our interview, Stella was located in a northern state and was half-way through the course work of a doctoral program. She related to me that the doctoral program was a direct result of her online master's degree. Prior to earning the master's, she was living in a foreign country, married to a man from that country, and managing her own business. She wanted to change professions, so she decided to earn a master's degree to facilitate that change. Working full time was a factor that led Stella to seek an online degree. She found there were no degree programs in her field the foreign country where she was living, and many programs in the United States, even if advertised as online, had a residency requirement that she could not afford due to the extensive travel that would be involved. She researched programs in the United States and finally found a

fully online program offered by a brick and mortar university. She described her decision to enter the program:

The courses were the same as those offered face-to-face. The institution was accredited. I talked with some post graduate students who had a positive experience. I came to the decision gradually that I needed a master's degree, and there was no local alternative. It was something I felt I needed to make a personal career change.

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

When I asked Stella if her perspective of the world had changed as a result of earning the online degree, she shared this response:

Oh, absolutely. Completely. It was, and I think of this a lot, that I undertook it thinking, "Okay, I'm going to learn to do some things, and I'm going to learn some stuff, you know, some degree, or whatever, so I can learn how to do the new job, and then I'll be done, and then I will go on with my life as before, but just with a new and improved version of it. And, instead, it was just completely transformative.

I then mentioned that the topic of my dissertation was transformation, and she answered:

Yes, I saw that, and I told a friend about it and she said, "Oh, well, she's going to love you." I don't know, I guess it depends on what you mean exactly by transformative. Well, to give you an example, when I began my master's program, it was in 1998. I was living overseas, I had been living there for ten

years, basically, not to get distracted with my life story, but this explains why I say it was so transformative, but my undergrad degree was in a foreign language, and I did my junior year abroad, and during the junior year I met this guy, and then I went back to finish my B.A., and we did the back and forth thing for a while, but basically I went back overseas permanently, or I thought, about a year after I graduated from college. We got married, had a fantastic marriage, everything was great, he encouraged me, I started this master's program, again, I was working full time and going to school, but he was just incredibly supportive. And, then I went through the whole thesis thing, which was, my master's thesis was almost 400 pages long, and it was a, I wrote it in the space of about four months over a very, very intense summer. Yes. I had been researching it, you know, sort of gradually, but the actual writing of it was pretty much from April to August of 2002. And, then after I finished this master's thesis, and I went to defend it because I wanted kind of formal closure of this program that I had spent four years doing part time – I could only take one class because of the whole synchronous thing – I could only do that once a week with working full time and everything. So, I went and I got all kinds of amazing encouragement from my professor; he encouraged me to get a Ph.D., and I said, “Oh, I can't go now because I'm overseas.” And, you can't really do a Ph.D. online, nor would I want to, even then I knew that I wouldn't want to. It is a little too isolated for the doctorate program. I needed a little human interaction, occasionally, to keep me from going insane. So, I went through all this, and then I went back overseas

after this tour of victory of finishing my master's and had sort of the classic post-partum depression of, you know, after having worked so intensely on this final project for so long, and it was suddenly not there any more, but also, I found myself really feeling like having completed this amazing thing that I had accomplished and it was done and I could go on, I felt like I had started something because I really did do a lot of work on my thesis that I wanted to pursue further, and I didn't really have any opportunity to do that there. And, even though I had felt happy and fine and satisfied as your average person is on your average day, I just ended up feeling really awful, and I kept getting all this encouragement, and my master's thesis won some awards, and a paper based on it won an award when it was presented at a conference, and all these things, instead of being happy about those kinds of recognitions, it just made me more and more depressed because it was like, "Okay, I could be doing something out there, but except I can't because I'm here, and so, I gradually realized that I had to keep going with it, and so, I left. And, I completely left my prior life behind me and flew here. So, it definitely changed me. I mean, if you had said to me the summer that I was working on my thesis, four years ago, that I would be living in the United States and half-way through a Ph.D. program at this point I would have looked at you like . . . alien. It was completely unthinkable. I mean, when my professors were saying, "Oh, you could really get a Ph.D." it wasn't, "Oh, I really wish I could." I automatically said, "No. I can't," and yet, and then I did. I

guess it made me realize some things that I really needed for myself that I wasn't getting and had no opportunity to get.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

Stella noticed changes in her thinking during the master's, but full acceptance of that change, and action upon it, came after she graduated. One particular class challenged Stella and had a much greater impact on her than what was stated in the syllabus of the course as expected outcomes. She described the excitement she felt:

It became obvious really quickly, even though I didn't yet know how radically it was going to change things for me, but it was something important I could tell right away because I was using it, I mean, we would study things, and I would go out the very next day and I would see that I was thinking about the problems and the questions that I was trying to grasp at work in very different ways and using theory to try to figure out solutions. It was immediately central.

Stella began to redefine herself as a result of the learning experience:

I really became connected to something fundamental in my identity that I had been neglecting for a really long time which is just this kind of scholarly approach to the world, wanting to investigate things in a systematic way that isn't seen as the kind of research I would do in my job. It's a different way of posing questions and answers that obviously I'm learning to do effectively and correctly, and everything, but I'm sort of wired this way . . . I will tell you that the most influential class that I took was one of our first classes. It was theory, and I was

not particularly excited about taking this class because I thought it would be abstract, and my focus at that point was so much on acquiring practical knowledge, so I wasn't really expecting this class to be anything special except as a requirement that I had to fulfill. And, yet I found it to be the most useful class in my work. That was the time I mean I was already working in a new field and doing a lot of projects and was doing well enough that they gave me lots of responsibility very quickly, and it was so useful to me and opened up my mind to thinking in ways that I found so exciting because it was a really perfect blend, to me, of thinking about things in ways and then being able to go out and apply them or see how they would apply in certain situations. So, I think what it allowed me to discover is how important it is to me to be able to combine both theory and practice and think about things in new ways. So, that was a real discovery for me, and that was when I really realized I was on, that's when I got very excited about what I was doing, and though I didn't realize it at the time, that's what really changed the way I approached the program and, for example, in our program we had three options for the degree: we could take all course work with no projects or anything, which meant we had to take more classes; you could do a project on your area of interest, some kind of professional document; or, you could do a thesis which was preparation for people thinking of getting a Ph.D. And, even though if you had asked me at the time I would have said, "There's no way I can get a Ph.D.," it occurred to me after I had this theory class

that I really wanted to write a thesis so I could bring together the theoretical part of it. So, that definitely was the class that changed the direction of my life.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

After leaving behind her husband, her mother-in-law and father-in-law whom she also loved dearly, her friends, the career that initially prompted her to seek a master's degree, and her sense of security and competence, Stella returned to America to pursue a doctorate degree. Immediately, she realized her adaptation to the overseas culture for a period of ten years caused her some difficulty in acclimating to the culture of the United States. She had difficulty conducting ordinary transactions and described this challenge:

When I moved here, I was so fresh off the boat I didn't know how to get anything. I didn't know how to rent an apartment, I messed up the first check I wrote, all these little things that are normal skills in my life, and in the foreign country I could do them fine, but they are different enough here that I found them to be difficult.

Although Stella had grown up in the United States, her return to this country after living abroad for an extended period was like moving to a foreign country. She knew many aspects of society had changed in the United States, and she had seen changes during her occasional return visits, but becoming accustomed to this culture remained difficult:

It was embarrassing, in some ways, too, because I don't sound like a foreigner or look like a foreigner, and so, you know, people were a little perplexed that a

grown woman didn't know how to pull out a check. (laughter) Like, "What's wrong with you?" (laughter)

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

The transformative change that took place within Stella as a result of the master's degree prompted her to leave her home, husband, family, friends, and career and embark on the journey for a Ph.D. Stella acknowledged that the master's program was more of a life-changing event for her than it is for many people:

I realize that even to become a doctoral student, you know, in my program everybody already has a master's already, and so, they've already been through the master's program, but for a lot of them, it really was just taking classes or, for those who went straight through, you know, it was a continuation of school and what they had always done. And so, it's not really the same for everybody.

Her decision to pursue the Ph.D. meant she had to relocate to the United States, re-learn this culture, and leave behind her status as a self-employed business woman to become a student. Stella had a degree of success and independence where she was, but she was unfulfilled intellectually. The realization that the master's was the beginning of her pursuit of knowledge rather than the end was something Stella said was mutual for both herself and her spouse:

I was the primary bread winner in our family. I was self-employed, as I said, and then after I moved into the new career it became so successful my husband actually quit his job and came to work with me to help me run the office. And

that is really atypical in a lot of places, and it was pretty atypical there, not scandalous, or anything, but certainly not the typical division among people I know here. So, I don't really think it was an issue of me needing to verify my success. I pretty much mastered that, pretty well. And, even though it was really neat stuff, I came to the realization that I really, really needed to do this. It had been growing for a while, this knowledge, I think in both of us, although we hadn't talked about it. And, I didn't really want to acknowledge it myself because I knew what it would entail because I knew him and I knew he would not leave his country to live here for a variety of reasons. I mean, I just feared that it would create this complete upheaval of everything and so it wouldn't just be a question of, "Okay, let's move to America so I can get the degree." I knew exactly what would happen. So, it was hard to get to the point where I said, "Okay, I have to now do this." But, although it was hard on both of us, he knows me very well and he said, "You need to do this. I know you. It's something that you've always kind of had in you." So, it's not like I had to convince him or anything.

Although the decision was difficult to make, Stella made it clear that she did not doubt it was the correct decision for her to make:

This is the thing that during those dark days of self-doubt that I think are so a part of the whole Ph.D. process, and I really kept going, is that I never, ever had a single moment's question of maybe I made a mistake or maybe I did the wrong thing. Not one. So, I'm very happy about that. Of course, it could still come, but . . . I'm starting my third year now. I really wouldn't have been able to stay in the

relationship in any fulfilling way, anyway, because I just would have been so unhappy because I would have been going through the conflict of what something else was missing. And that's when both of us arrived at that understanding. It wasn't a question of, "How can I get by without doing this?" It was, "We can't continue on because I am not the same person that I was before I started." And that, I think, was the biggest surprise to me of all. Like I said, I think it brought to the surface things that were already in me. I don't think it created anything that wasn't there already. But, the kind of awareness that it brought to me and how it sort of shifted my priorities so profoundly . . . I really thought I would take these classes and learn something, and I ended up with it re-engineering my entire life as a result.

Stella shared her final assessment of the most important outcome of earning the online master's degree:

I think it helped me really figure out what I wanted in life and what was important. I'll say that my relationship with my husband was important to me, but I realized that I couldn't really fully be there if I neglected aspects, so I would say self-discovery was probably the most important.

Gail – the “I” perspective

This study would be incomplete unless I, the researcher, shared my journey of transformation through earning an online master's degree. As one who meets all criteria of the study, I am part of the heuristic self-search inquiry process. For the participants of

this study, I legitimized the inquiry because I, too, had “been there” and had earned a fully online master’s degree. I faced and overcame many of the same barriers, and I allowed the master’s degree to change me. I embraced the change, as many of these women did, and affirmed that the person who emerged, and is still emerging after the degree, was the person I had always needed to become but did not have the vehicle until given the opportunity to pursue the master’s degree online and the subsequent Ph.D. I realized with each interview undertaken for the purposes of this dissertation that I had been granted permission to listen to the participant’s personal experience because I had traveled down a similar road. Each one trusted me, knowing that the information she shared was not viewed as data merely to be numbered and counted and analyzed, but was, rather, viewed holistically as an experience that led to the discovery of meaning for that individual and, potentially, for others who might read her personal account. There was never any intent to reduce the experiences of these women to a survey or questionnaire. I would not ask them to do something I would not do, and I would not share the depth of my experience in a dehumanizing survey with someone who likely had no understanding or desire to empathize with my personal struggle. I shared a kinship with these women in the interview process; we hugged, we laughed, and a few times we cried. Each one transferred to me her hope that other women might somehow benefit from the telling of her accomplishment in earning a degree that at times seemed elusive. It was easy to write of their experiences, and much more difficult to contemplate sharing my own.

Kuhn (1962) taught me that resistance pushes against acknowledgment of a new paradigm in society; Sela-Smith (2002) informed me that resistance within the individual pushes against self-inquiry and self-transformation. Investigating this “final frontier,” or “interiority of our experience” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 54) has not previously been noted as significant, yet, I agree with Sela-Smith (2002) in saying, “I speculate that this region has a potential to bring expanded understanding to many other arenas of our investigation” (p. 54).

I realize that my own transformation led me to devote years of my life to asking the question, “How have the lives of other women been changed as a result of earning an online degree?” My desire to know began with my own experience which I share with readers hoping that perhaps they, too, will find meaning in the experience. In the introduction of this paper, I told of my struggle to earn an undergraduate degree while balancing the care of small children and employment. I did not share one of the most traumatic experiences that occurred while trying to enter the online master’s degree.

The background for this experience began when I decided I had to forfeit my dream of earning the degree of my choice due to the inaccessibility of the degree. I enrolled instead in a local master’s degree program. I had one child living at home, and I was working full time, so I could not commute several hours to a distant university. Coinciding with my decision to enter a master’s program was my entering a new job. During my first week at this new job, I learned from my department director that a prestigious university in Texas was offering the master’s degree I wanted, and it was being offered online. My director agreed with me that the online degree in educational

technology would be much more beneficial to my position; so, with her recommendation and support, I immediately reversed my plans and requested that my paperwork be transferred to the institution offering the online degree. However, after several days, I realized my paperwork had not been sent, so I went to the office of the administrator responsible for releasing my paper work to the institution. Here is an account of what transpired:

As I entered the office of the dean, I received a chilly reception. He sat behind an imposing desk with his eyes cast downward, and he did not look at me directly. Not realizing what was about to happen, I sat down in front of his desk and asked politely, “Dr. ___, I recently requested that my records be sent from your office to ___ University, and for some reason, they still have not received them. I’m just here to check on the status of my records.” Without looking at me, he spoke slowly, deliberately, “Your records probably haven’t been sent because of your grades.” I inhaled suddenly. Needless to say, I was puzzled. I knew I had a high grade point average, so calmly, but firmly, I said, “No, it was not because of my grades.” But he said it again, this time more slowly and more emphatically, “We...probably...didn’t...send...your...records...because...of...your...grades.” My shock turned to anger at that moment because I felt - no, I knew - what was happening. This was an attempt to belittle me, to cause me discomfort and to have me believe, somehow, that he held my future in *his* hands. It was about control. I looked at him, with my face flushed and red, and said deliberately, “No...it...was...not...because...of...my...grades.” At that moment, his secretary

placed an opened folder on his desk, and, after glancing at it for just a moment, he said, without looking at me and with no note of apology or regret in his voice, “I guess it wasn’t because of your grades.” I was appalled by his effort to discredit me. After his secretary assured me the records would, indeed, be sent as requested, I left his office and went directly to my director and told her about the encounter. I thought that would be the end of my bad experience with the dean, but, the story continues. The next day, the dean approached my director and told her I should not be employed in my position because I didn’t have a master’s degree. She informed him that I was enrolling in the online master’s of education in educational technology program, and she had a great deal of confidence in me. I later learned that this particular dean had a reputation for trying to make women cry, and I failed to follow suit. Rather, I was spurred to action and became very resolved.

This disorienting dilemma illustrates one type of resistance encountered by women who challenge the status quo. As it was, I became more determined than ever to complete the online master’s degree. My intrinsic motivation to earn the degree was now reinforced with an extrinsic motivation of overcoming blatant harassment which greeted me upon my entry to higher education. However, I remind myself just three decades ago my admittance to a master’s program would not have been an option; many universities refused “to accept women over age 35 for graduate programs” (Ekstrom, 1972, p. 9).

Unexpected Discovery and Heightened Personal Awareness

Mid-way through the degree process, my motivation, fueled by anger and the need to gain credentials for my job, was replaced by a realization that I was becoming a stronger person who wanted to continue learning and reach my full potential. My advisor, who was also one of my instructors and one who demonstrated an ethic of care in his relationship with students and advisees, modeled genuine concern for each student in his class, and I wanted to model that for others. I felt I was learning more than at any other time in my life. In all other instances, I had gone to school only to learn specific, measurable outcomes. In the master's program, for the first time I felt I was challenged to think critically and independently. I left all thoughts of the rude, inconsiderate, and ill-mannered dean behind me and focused instead on the mental challenges that lay before me. It was exciting! I was learning, applying the learning in my work with distance education, and I was seeing positive results.

At the university where I worked, I found great support for my effort to continue learning – faculty and co-workers spoke words of encouragement regularly, and as long as I stayed within that realm, I was supported. Unfortunately, what lay ahead was a clash with the culture in which I lived, the culture that lay outside the boundaries of the university. The notion of a woman, a mother and grandmother, pursuing a Ph.D. was not supported by the culture in which I lived. In this culture, women were reared to be passive and to allow gender to dictate the priorities of life in a prescribed order – God, spouse, children, career. Women were expected to sacrifice their personal goals for their spouse and children, they were never to question intellectually their status in the home or

at work, and they were to accept their position as part of God's will. These were unspoken mores which were deeply engrained, honored, and revered, and they were supported by a misinterpretation of faith that encouraged women to be passive and subservient. These mores go back many generations, and it will require future generations of strong, open-minded women to overcome some of the customs that are debilitating for women.

I began adopting, through a process of critical thinking and self-analysis, new mental models, and these new models sometimes created dissonance within me and with others. Gradually, I reassessed the restrictive and self-defeating underpinnings and reshaped my personal faith. I believe all human beings have the right to achieve their potential, and I believe this is in harmony with the principles of my faith. Since personal endeavor has been deemed honorable for a man in this culture, it certainly must be honorable for a woman, as well. I found similar beliefs in the women I interviewed for this study. I was told by these women that they wanted to set an example for their children, but they were also interested in providing encouragement to other women.

As I completed my master's degree and began the doctorate, I had misgivings that I would be able to remain focused on online learning within the parameters of human resource development. I also had doubts about my functioning well in a face-to-face environment after having flourished in the online learning environment for two-and-a-half years. I found that I work best when at the keyboard, learning independently, reflecting, writing, and engaging in "mind-to-mind communication," as Paige put it so well. I wasn't sure how I would handle returning to the dynamics of a face-to-face

classroom where the imagery, the oratory, the orator, the tonality, the diction, the vocabulary, the hairstyle, the makeup, the clothing, the expressions, the nuances sometimes overruled the essence of the topic.

When I voiced these concerns to my instructor, he reassured me that he would assist me in staying focused on online learning, and that he would work with me to carve the path for my research. At that moment, I knew there was another person with the same ethic of care that I had found in my master's advisor. I chose that instructor to be my committee chair in the doctoral program, and he has been instrumental in my progress at every turn. So, I know in my heart this issue of support for learners is not about men versus women. It is about people empathizing with other people. It is, as Dedra said, about people willing to share power, or knowledge. On the other hand, however, power is often interpreted, not as knowledge, but, rather, as a sense of authority and position based upon the belief that "one's own objectification is more authoritative than someone else's" (Schweickart, 1990, p. 80). I had always accepted as truth the position of those in authority who strongly demonstrated their own view of reality; now, I question those in positions of authority and their views.

My 76-year-old mother told me recently to complete my studies on behalf of women. "Do it for the women," she said, meaning I needed to complete my educational goal to encourage women like herself, a woman who never received a single word of encouragement to seek higher education and was never told her dreams were important. When I interviewed the eighteen women in this study, I found a common thread; there was a desire to help women struggling to access and earn their education, women unable

to attend a traditional university, and women who question their self-worth because they are falling behind in knowledge and skills and, therefore, in society, due to a lack of education. In whatever way we can, the participants of this study and I want to share knowledge – power – so other women can turn hope into reality.

Willingness to Overcome Resistance to Redefine Self

As I write this reflection, I realize it may cause even deeper misunderstandings within my own family unit upon its release to the public. In the face of resistance from members of my family, I made the decision to earn a Ph.D. Writing my deepest feelings about why I did this won't earn me praise or affirmation; yet, writing it may speak to other women who face the same difficult choices. I made a choice to face the resistance within myself to share my thoughts. I have no regrets. The phone rings, and I cringe, fully expecting it to be my daughter who spent two hours one evening telling me how wrong I am to be spending so much time pursuing an education, how selfish I am, how out of step I must be with God, and how futile the endeavor must surely be. The gulf between us, in many ways, is of my own creation. The former "I" taught her in the old ways. The new "I" is not in agreement. We are finally forced to agree to disagree and end the conversation without anger, but as though we are strangers speaking a foreign language without an interpreter. I return to work on the dissertation, and she returns to her role as mother, wife, and church-goer, believing whole-heartedly that her presence in a building and time spent performing activities deemed acceptable in the eyes of a select group somehow make her more valuable to society than those of us struggling outside

the sanctioned zone of human endeavor, those of us struggling in the undefined region of tacit knowledge.

I acknowledge that the women in this study and I are linked by our willingness to take a risk – risk disapproval from those we love, risk retribution from others who don't understand why we are struggling to learn, risk sacrificing what is safe and known in order to model learning as a way of life for those we love, and risk being caught between the comfortable, predictable microcosm of the past and the unknown dimension of the future.

When asked, on many occasions, what I plan to do after earning my Ph.D., I generally respond that I want to be ready for whatever opportunities may come. I entered the master's degree to pursue a degree I had always wanted and to gain credentials needed for my job, but when I finished the degree I was left with a desire to pursue learning for the sake of learning. I entered the Ph.D. with a different mindset; there was no prescribed outcome which the degree was calculated to net me. True, I wanted to become better equipped to continue my work in distance education, but there was no specific and targeted outcome. My purpose was to be open to possibilities, to know myself more fully, to affirm that my goals, and any woman's goals, are of equal worth to those of men in our society. I want to be part of a broadening support structure for women seeking their education so that someday in the future women will be promoted based on *their potential* rather than on their performance.

Openness to Change and the Process of Becoming

Sela-Smith (2002) said the goal of heuristic research “is to come to a deeper understanding of whatever is calling out from the inside of the self to be understood” (p. 64). My struggle to better understand myself, and to become something I may not know the boundaries of at this time, is not, I believe, in conflict with decency; rather, it may be that the act of self-analysis is tragically overlooked in our society. Self-inquiry may be all too quickly regarded as taboo among those who believe they are already everything they need to be, while others of us, caught between the old self and the new self, are dedicated to the ongoing process of becoming something more than we were yesterday. I welcome the change I’ve experienced.

I am now contributing to my family, whether they know it or not, a new interpretation of the world based on increased awareness of diversity, culture, critical thinking, and research as an outgrowth of pushing myself to the limits of my capabilities. Were I an athlete, my efforts would be applauded, but society often tries to derail intellectual pursuits. As Marion said of her family’s response to her earning a Ph.D., “They think I’m ego-tripping.” I see the fallacy in that response, and I rely more and more on my own inner sense of knowing rather than being tossed around by the speculation of others.

While in graduate school, I became friends with a woman from India who had been forced into an arranged marriage with a man who physically abused her. Finally, she fled with her son to the United States where she began pursuing a Ph.D. As I listened to her tell of the horrible conditions she faced in an abusive relationship, and the broader

cultural intolerance in her country for women like herself who sought to end their suffering through legal separation and divorce, I realized I was fortunate to live in this country. I also realized my friend's experience was metaphorically similar to that of many women in this country who are trapped by their circumstances or by their own self-limitation.

Sadly, many women do not capitalize on the opportunity to earn an online degree because they cannot overcome the resistance they face from without and from within. The resistance may come from society in a bombardment of images portraying women as physical objects rather than strong, intellectually-capable individuals. The resistance may come from a university administrator who decides to impede, rather than aid, a woman's progress. The resistance may come from a husband who discourages, psychologically or physically, his wife's advancement. The resistance may come from children who won't accept or acknowledge that their parents are unique individuals who deserve to maximize their own potential and pursue their own goals. The resistance may come from an employer who sabotages a woman's educational pursuits by adding to her workload – this happened to a friend of mine, causing her to drop out of her Ph.D. program. The resistance may come from within the woman herself in the form of debilitating fear, insecurity, or low self-esteem.

As I earned my degree, I had to face, among other things, the life-threatening illness of a grandchild, marital stresses, exhaustion, illness of elderly parents, castigation from some members of my family, and stresses of the work place. Yet, despite the

challenges, which at times seemed insurmountable, there remained an underlying desire for self-discovery that sustained forward momentum.

A Retrospective Affirmation of Altered Personality and Identity

Education became transformative for me when I stepped out of the norm and challenged deeply-engrained cultural norms. I found that good things can happen inside the soul where no one sees. The master's degree and the Ph.D. have given me an awareness of the vastness of knowledge, the opportunity to make a difference for good, optimism about possibilities I cannot see ahead, and, the belief that I might someday be able to make a contribution to others. That looms larger than the fear of retribution even from those I love; yet, I also realize that having begun the journey, I cannot unlearn or cast off past experiences that have reshaped me into a person who may be different than before. Stella helped me see this as she asked questions of me at the conclusion of our telephone interview:

Gail: I did earn my master's fully online, yes.

Stella: And, I'm guessing that you found it to be transformational.

Gail: Yes, I did.

Stella: That's the sort of topic that somebody who hasn't been through it, I don't think could even know.

Gail: Right. Some people look a little quizzical and ask, "How could that be so transformational?" I think you're right. I'm not the same person I was when I started, and I see the world differently, and to me that's

the basis of transformation . . . seeing the world totally differently, for one reason or another. And, that's the way that it had an impact on me, and that's the common thread that I find here for these women. There has been transformation, not exactly the same transformation, but definitely they see things differently.

Stella: Well, you know, I really have come to the conclusion that that's kind of the point, the real point, of education. I mean, any kind of true scholarly endeavor has got to, by the nature of knowledge, has got to also change the vessel, as well. So, I would say that profound transformation is a sign of what education should accomplish. I just think that most of us aren't prepared for that when we go into it. Did you expect it?

Gail: No. No. Definitely not, and it has caused some strife in my family. My children don't support, well, let me clarify that, my daughters don't support my going back to school, my continuing my education, sort of like your in-laws. They don't understand it, and they don't like me not being the same person I always was, and they don't see me as any other person except the mother and the grandmother role, because I do have grandchildren, and this is very difficult for them. But, I know within my own heart, like you know within your own heart, it is essential to life to be the person that you know you can become, and you cannot allow other people to bind you with those roles that they

feel suit you best. You know, it's very stifling, and it's unthinkable to stay within those bounds. So, now I see women who, some women don't want to change their role, they don't want to be transformed, they don't want any kind of change at all, but for those who want it, and can't get it . . .

Stella: Well, even if you think you don't want it, I mean, I would not have said that at all. I think if someone had explained to me, and I had believed them, that it would have had this kind of, I don't know if I would have done it because it would have just been so terrifying to me that this would happen because my whole identity was wrapped up in the life that I led, you know . . .

Gail: It's true because almost every one said, "I just wanted the degree, I just wanted the skills, and I thought I would just go on with my life, and then I got to the end," and I waited eight months, and during that eight months I wrestled with, "Okay, I have my master's. That's all I wanted. Something is missing. Why can't I just be satisfied? It's going to be a total disruption of my life." Very few people supported me in going back to school. "Why can't I just be happy with this?" And, yet, inside I knew, "I'm not the same person." But, I'm like you, if someone had told me that, I never would have believed it.

Stella: I wouldn't have believed it, and, if I had, I would probably have said, "Okay, well, I'm not prepared to make that level of sacrifice," but the

thing is, you know, part of it, for me anyways, is I realized that it was useless to . . . go back there and pretend that I didn't need those things and my relationships could be the way that they had always been. It just couldn't. There was this thing in me that, you know, needed to be satisfied, and even if I had made the less selfish choice of sticking around, it still would not have benefited anybody, because it wouldn't have been the same. You can't go back.

For me, the process of self awareness took place “in waves of awareness over time” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 67) rather than in a single moment. Education became the vehicle for investigating the way I viewed the world. Sela-Smith (2002) explained that it is through the self-inquiry of our experiences that our “flawed awareness can be reconstructed by new, corrected, complete, or reinterpreted information, and the meanings that propel our lives can be transformed” (p. 62).

Because the heuristic process begins with a question that calls out to the researcher and which is rooted in the tacit knowledge of the researcher, “the researcher must experience self-dialogue, be willing to use feeling to enter the tacit dimension, and allow intuition to make connections in the structures of tacit knowledge” (Sela-Smith, 2002, p. 63). I discovered greater dimensions of myself as I struggled to complete my education and seek answers to the question of how earning an online degree might affect women. Meeting the women in this study, hearing about their lives and their accomplishments, and reflecting on my own transformational experience helped diminish the times I felt isolated and served to make more precious the moments I felt

kinship with other human beings who were struggling to defy resistance – both external and internal – and validate their capabilities. Sela-Smith (2002) summarized the challenge of discovering new knowledge:

I contend that heuristic inquiry that results in self-transformation and the creation of a story that generates potential for transformation in others and in society is the strength of the self-inquiry method. A man called Jesus reportedly went out into the desert for 40 days and 40 nights 20 centuries ago to experience what may well have been a heuristic inquiry wherein he confronted himself, his feelings, his beliefs, and his myths. As a result, he experienced self-transformation. He told his story and lived from it the rest of his short life. Others hearing the story were transformed and a religion grew up; the entire world has been directly or indirectly impacted by it, for better and for worse, for the past 2,000 years. (pp. 82 – 83)

How can I question what might come of human struggle, or the sharing of the struggles of these women? Kuhn (1962) influenced me when I read “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” in the summer of 2003. I sat up most of one night in graduate school writing a reflection on his book for class the next morning, and that writing, done in the urgency of the moment, still resonates for me:

“The Structure of Scientific Revolution,” by Thomas S. Kuhn, is one of the most meaningful pieces of literature I’ve read in my time on this earth. I’ve always begrudged resistance, cursed it daily, pondered its necessity, and relegated it to the punishment of man by God. Resistance – the natural force which opposes the

process of becoming - is our constant companion; it ages us, slows us, and numbs us, yet, now I see that it proves us. I may have erred in my estimation of the role that resistance plays in molding society, its systems, its processes, and its individuals. Without resistance, it is evident to me now that that which is the object of resistance could not be refined properly without the bombardment of force against it, which ultimately leads to a decision, crisis, and turning point. Not all objects of resistance propel themselves into “somethingness,” that is certain, but without resistance, credibility would be lacking for those persons or mental exercises that do overcome that which pushes so fervently against its progress. Within this context, I reflect upon some basic elements that face resistance. First, the human mind resists learning and all of the terminology and symbolism it hurls upon the learner. This weight of learning is not welcomed with open arms; it is borne, as a mother bears a child while hoping that from the involuntary pain will come something uplifting and beautiful, something meaningful and transformative. As in birth, there is resistance to all “new” things and ideas. Forces are at work to obliterate the new person, new capabilities, new ideas, and new feelings of hope. Resistance is there, at the bedside, as the new person devotes himself or herself to arrival and existence. There is assistance, true, but there is a great deal of resistance. Upon arrival of the new baby, there is a great deal of celebration to mark the triumph over resistance, or, conversely, there is a great deal of sadness when that is not the case. As the child grows up, it faces obstacles and resistance – it must learn to sit up, crawl, walk, run, and

speaking, while constantly bumping into walls. We celebrate each stage of a child's development since it symbolizes the forward progression of the child. Kuhn spoke of the role of resistance in legitimizing an anomaly in the scientific community. Resistance guarantees that scientists will not be lightly distracted and that anomalies that lead to change will penetrate existing knowledge. Without resistance, crisis could not escalate to the degree necessary for viable change. We are programmed as a society to look for the resistance as much as we look for the outcome. It is important to be able to trace the history of an idea and ask such questions as, "Is it worthy? Has it undergone enough scrutiny, enough resistance? Or, is this seemingly good on the surface but not credible as a person, system, or belief?" before accepting any potential outcome. Kuhn provided my first lesson in examining resistance as a positive rather than a negative.

Recognizing resistance as a positive force, rather than a negative force, provided me a new perspective - one that allows me to more readily accept dissent from without and from within, and one that allows me to honor my own sense of knowing in a way that was not possible before engaging in a personal struggle for knowledge.

I discovered, as Marion said, I "could be, that I had accomplished something, and that meant something in the academic environment." I deem my personal struggle a success by the sole criterion that I, like other women in this study, experienced unexpected personal transformation after earning an online degree, and that transformation motivated me to further pursue knowledge related to the transformation of women in online learning.

Summary of Transformational Change in Some Participants

Cranton and Roy (2003) explained, “Individuation is the *process* by which we become aware of who we are as different from others” (p. 91). For the women described in this chapter, the online learning environment fostered such a process. The six women who changed their lives as a result of their online learning found “a new sense of identity within a new meaning perspective which can lead to greater autonomy, control and responsibility for their own lives” (Mezirow, 1978, p. 102). They became new individuals.

Marion, an African-American woman, found learning to be transformative when experienced in a learning environment that offered anonymity and freedom from racial bias. Marion found that she could be someone who contributed to valued knowledge, and she not only completed the master’s degree online, but chose to earn a doctorate degree despite resistance from some members of her extended family. Marion planned to teach in higher education after completing the doctorate. Dedra found the critical reflection of online learning initially unsettling, causing her to question her current perceptions of who she was and the position relegated to her by her work and by her spouse. After hours of reflecting in her online courses, and trying to compare her current learning to old paradigms, Dedra reached a place of “letting go” of old models and accepting the unique quality of this experience. She found herself gaining confidence and contemplating why she had accepted limitations on who she was and who she could become. As a result, Dedra decided to free herself from a debilitating personal

relationship and enter a career she had dreamed of - providing professional development to educators in higher education.

Paige found the “mind-to-mind” communication in the online environment supportive of her learning style and personality. Paige described herself as an introvert who preferred written communication. As Paige engaged in critical reflection, learning and rigorous self-determination, she had to overcome ongoing resistance from her family. By overcoming the resistance, and allowing the reflection and learning to change her perception of self, Paige felt she “self-actualized” and redefined herself. She now contributes to society by teaching at a university and conducting international research. Paige affirmed the transformational outcomes of the online degree and the person she has become.

Diana found the online environment totally remarkable; resources were at her fingertips, and she could see the expectations of the learning environment and the goals of the learning clearly outlined in the course. She also felt that she had control over much of her learning, and that was a dynamic shift from the traditional education she had experience. Diana already had a life mission to aid women who had been victims of abuse and who were living in shelters, but the online learning sparked a dramatic and unexpected change in the way Diana saw herself and her role in providing assistance to women. Prior to the online learning, Diana separated her role as a professional educator from her passion for helping victimized women. As a result of the learning, Diana came to view herself as a person and as an educator differently. She became empowered to facilitate a new kind of assistance to women in shelters so they, too, could access

education online and alter the course of their lives. Diana's view of how she could help others was dramatically transformed, and the goal of her life expanded to include assistance that would enable women, like herself, to overcome crushing barriers by accessing higher education learning opportunities.

Gillian engaged in online learning after sending a daughter to college and learning of an online master's in her chosen career. Immediately, she learned to love the online environment. Gillian was open to the shift in her thinking that enabled her to choose to continue her education and earn an online doctorate degree. The resistance is there, she said, in the face of bias against a fully online doctorate degree. However, Gillian affirmed the person she has become, the goals she has adopted, and her new path to contribute to society by providing adult education through distance education.

Stella never envisioned the online master's degree experience would so radically alter her life. She began the degree simply to acquire new skills for her job; she encountered, however, a mind-altering course on theory. That course reshaped her thinking. After defending her thesis, Stella accepted herself as a newly transformed person, and she realized there was no way to pretend to be the same person she was prior to the transformative learning. The outcome was to leave the life she had in a foreign country, come to the United States, and enroll in a Ph.D. program. The defense of her thesis, winning awards for the thesis, and co-authoring a book took Stella in directions she said were "alien" to her prior to engaging in the online learning experience. In retrospect, Stella said she could not remain the person she had been, and she chose to move forward toward self-fulfillment.

Lastly, I engaged in online learning for professional survival, initially, but found that my old ways of thinking were sloughed off and replaced with new self-confidence and new goals for continued learning. Yes, resistance accompanied my every step, but I now understand that the more resistance I encountered, the more determined I became to dislodge restraints on what I could become and gain understanding of myself as a unique individual. It wasn't easy. Mezirow (1978) explained the inner conflict which often accompanies a transformational learning experience:

Making a critical appraisal of the assumptions underlying our roles, priorities and beliefs is usually tension producing and can be acutely threatening. We defend our social roles with the armor of our strongest emotions, for it is often through these roles that we have acquired our very concept of ourselves and achieved our greatest satisfactions. Usually a dilemma must generate pressure and anxiety to effect a change in perspective. (p. 105)

I have no doubt that my participation in online learning was transformational, and the effects of that transformation guided me toward new decisions, and new actions, that would not have been contemplated, nor attempted, in years prior. Goals for the future now include a desire to assist women in gaining skills for accessing education. This desire did not come out of my professional position, my family, or my faith. It came directly from the expanded understanding of myself which resulted from the online learning experience and the subsequent learning in a doctorate program. As a result, authenticity, or the "genuine self in the community" (Cranton & Roy, 2003, p. 94), has been established.

From this experience, I have a clearer understanding of myself, a clearer understanding of the eighteen participants who shared their experiences with me in the course of this study, and a clear path to clearer understanding of thousands of women learners who either hope to engage in online learning or who are currently engaged in online education. Furthermore, the shared experience with participants in this study led to recommendations that may benefit distance education policy and decision makers in higher education. These recommendations, contributions to new knowledge in human resource development, conclusions, and implications for future research are shared in Chapter VI.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

A review of the literature, and the shared experiences of the participants in this study, revealed a great deal about the barriers women must overcome to attain education, the gains they accrue, both personally and professionally, when they are able to overcome those barriers, and the potential for personal transformation in some learners. Online access to higher education allowed these women to capitalize on the benefits of education, experience various levels of professional and personal development, and, for some, undergo transformational change of their perceptions, values, and beliefs which resulted in determined action to alter their lives in some way. Their actions have the potential to impact members of their families, their immediate communities, and other members of society who are connected by virtue of a digital and global network.

Summary

Findings from this study indicate that barriers to education still exist for women, yet, when they persevere and do find access through online learning, there are benefits that span several areas of their lives. Benefits may manifest themselves in terms of professional development – employment for the first time, a change in career paths, entrepreneurship, or increased income. Other benefits may align with personal development – increased self-confidence, self-esteem, credibility, respect, goal completion, or satisfying one’s mission in life. Other benefits were more far-reaching in

terms of personal growth and transformation – an altered perception of self; a change in values, attitudes and beliefs; and a decision to act on revised mental constructs. The barriers, benefits, professional development, personal development, transformational change in some participants, the role resistance plays in transformational learning, the factors present in the online environment that support transformative learning experiences, learning theories which support models for transformation in online learning, and descriptive visual models which illustrate resistance, as well as the potential for transformation, are summarized in this section.

Barriers to Higher Education

The participants in this study shared the barriers they had faced in the past when trying to earn a degree. The barriers were institutional – barriers in higher education institutions such as admissions practices and faculty attitudes; situational – those related to their geographic location, child-bearing, health, family responsibilities, family resistance to pursuit of higher education, finances, or the unavailability of degree programs needed for career advancement; dispositional – those related to lack of self-confidence, self-doubt, shyness, recollections of unpleasant traditional classroom experiences, and a preference for more self-directed learning situations. Participants were not able to obtain the degree of their choice at a traditional university for one or more of these reasons.

Benefits of Online Education

Computer technology has transformed the delivery of education, the development and dissemination of knowledge, and communications between scholars and students (Kramarae, 2001). Enrollments in online courses rose significantly during the time period from 2003 to 2005, at which time they reached 2.4 million (Allen & Seaman, 2005; Simonson, 2006a). Women with families and jobs are seeking higher education, with women comprising the majority (57.2%) of students in higher education (The Nation, 2006). Women are increasingly drawn to distance education programs (Carnevale, 2002; Kramarae, 2001; National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Report, 2004; Selingo, 2005). Online education offers flexibility and access (Meyen & Lian, 1997).

Flexibility is critical because women face uncertainty in their pursuit and attainment of education due to the “imperfect control women have over births. . . . Women choose different career and family life-cycle paths because of these uncertainties” (Sheran, 2007, p. 367). However, according to Rovai and Baker (2005), the benefits of online education are not merely flexibility and access but include “educational effectiveness” (p. 40). For women, the online learning experiences were considered “socially richer” (Rovai & Baker, 2005, p. 40) and prompted greater levels of discussion by women (Graddy, 2006; Halio, 2004) This may be especially true for reflective learners in online classes (Downing & Chim, 2004), for reflective learners placed in smaller online discussion groups (Dooley & Wickersham, 2007; Wickersham & Dooley, 2006), or for women in gender-specific groups (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005).

Females prefer the anonymity of the online environment (Sullivan, 2002) and tend to engage in the course sooner and complete the course sooner than males (Dooley et al., 2005). Women in online learning place greater emphasis on personal networking and discussion than their male counterparts (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005; Dooley et al., 2005; Graddy, 2006; Halio, 2004; Kramarae, 2001; Rovai & Baker, 2005). Women have more diverse interests (including family, career, philosophy) and want to discuss more and work together (Kramarae, 2001) Online learning promotes rich interaction with fellow learners and instructors (Rovai & Baker, 2005); increasing levels of self-directed learning (Richardson & Newby, 2006), and social constructivist learning principles that are “self-organizing and transformative in nature” (Dabbagh, 2004, p. 48).

Participants in this study shared that they felt connected to the instructors, a “bridge” or support person, and fellow students. The level of caring demonstrated by the instructor was critical to the participants, and many felt they were more connected to their online instructors than they had been to professors in their traditional undergraduate classes. Group work forced many of the participants to utilize technology and correspond with classmates who were often thousands of miles away. Although they felt resistant to group work at the time, participants acknowledged that group activities allowed them to become better prepared for current job settings or to form lifelong friendships which they still maintain.

The flexibility of the online environment was an essential aspect for the women of this study because most of them worked full time and had children. They completed course work in their homes with their children around them, and even if they were

engaged in synchronous activities such as chat, they could still attend to their children's needs. One participant went on a cruise with her family while completing her online degree, and she was able to participate in her online class on the ship and be with her family on a trip they had planned several years earlier. Three of the women were able to attend class while being pregnant, and two of them experienced severe and prolonged morning sickness that would have prevented them from attending traditional classes; however, because their master's degree was delivered online, they were able to sit at their home computers and complete all of the requirements of their degrees. And, earning the degree positioned both of the women for job opportunities that required a master's degree.

The diversity of the online environment was a benefit noted by all of the participants. The richness of personalities from around the world allowed many of the women from rural areas who felt divorced from people in their professions to get a global perspective on topics they were discussing. In addition, the network of professionals from around the country and abroad provided an extended community from which these women were able to draw even after they graduated, and that network contributed to their success in securing jobs and pay increases.

Another benefit noted by these women was the safe learning environment they experienced online. Those who were shy or had experienced hostile classroom environments in the traditional classroom setting became more extroverted and communicative in what they perceived to be the less threatening online environment. Several noted that in the online environment there seemed to be equity, gender was not

an issue, and they felt free from stereotypes and prejudices. Paige said online, “all judgments are left behind; you are left with pure mind-to-mind communication.”

Anonymity was especially valued by Marion, an African-American woman, who felt that “race and color did not figure into the equation at all” and she was free to contribute without having someone attribute her position on an issue to her race. Other participants valued anonymity because “it removed some of the baggage not to know what everybody looked like.” Those who were expecting children during their degree program had the option to keep that information to themselves so it did not become a consideration in the minds of instructors or peers. And, Belle, who had undergone surgery for skin cancer on her face and felt very self-conscious even though there was no outward evidence of the surgery, was able to engage in learning without having anyone see her in person or without posting a photograph of herself.

Finally, the women of this study emphasized that online learning provided them an unprecedented level of control over their own learning, an opportunity for challenging intellectual discourse with peers and instructors, and more time for critical reflection about their learning and its affect on their lives. Many of these women had had no exposure to online learning prior to the online master’s program, and they were, as Dedra described, “energized” by the experience. In addition, the master’s thesis research conducted by some of the women led to new paths in their lives. One participant received awards for her thesis and was asked to co-author a book, one expanded her research to an international scale when she was hired to teach and research for a

university, and others shared that they continue to draw on their past research to enrich their current professional practice.

Professional Development

Women often choose to engage in online education for professional development. Some may want to move out of a dead-end, boring job and into an intellectually challenging career (von Prummer, 2000). Others may seek to improve their wages (Bierema, 2001) since women still trail men in pay, promotion, benefits, and other economic rewards (Bowler, 1999; Elder & Johnson, 1999; Knoke & Ishio, 1998). Indeed, women are still trying to overcome the glass ceiling – artificial barriers to the advancement and promotion of women and minorities (Maume, 2004). Online education is a way for women to enhance their careers without compromising their roles as a full-time employee, parent, or care-giver. According to Compton et al. (2006), it is no longer the norm in society for women to stay in the home and be full-time mothers and housewives, primarily due to economic reasons, while “the majority of adult students are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce, widowhood, or career change” (p. 74). Women often adjust career aspirations to accommodate their personal, family, or social responsibilities (Mickelson, 2003) so their career will be “a compatible match with marriage and family responsibilities (Whitmarsh et al., 2007, p. 231).

Women enter a professional career expecting fewer financial rewards as a result of their education (Mahitivanichcha, 2003). And, in the workplace, the level of a

woman's education remains less of a determinant for her advancement than are hours worked, general work experience, and employer tenure; women are likely to be viewed as unstable workers whose promotion would be riskier than that of their male counterparts (Maume, 2004). This was clearly evident, for example, in one study of hiring practices in higher education where women constituted only 37% of new hires at a university compared to 63% of new hires which were males (Marschke et al., 2007). Many women, influenced by their mothers or other females in their families, enter female-dominated careers where they encounter fewer obstacles to advancement; however, women who do make career changes often do so after receiving insights from mentors outside their families such as college classmates, professors, mentors and bosses (Whitmarsh et al., 2007).

Despite the current conditions in the workplace, and self-imposed limitations women place on their expectations for financial gain and promotion, there is also evidence that women do benefit financially from educational attainment (Kendall & Pogue, 2006). According to Kennedy (2002), "educated women are parlaying degrees into careers providing economic gain to society at large, encouraging others to attain degrees, and becoming more widely involved participants and contributors to society" (pp. vii-viii). This may continue to lead women to online education. Kingston et al. (2003) posited, "If education is the well-recognized creator of life chances, we should expect people to adapt their lives accordingly" (p. 55). The achievement of women in education is not an anomaly; "women's educational success appears anomalous *only* if

we seek to understand it by relying on theories of action that are based on the worldviews (habitus) and life circumstances (field) of men” (Mickelson, 2003, p. 374).

For the women of this study, new career opportunities were a direct outcome of earning the online master’s degree. For example, Cara earned a job that didn’t exist when she started her degree program, Taylor was hired as an assistant principal for an elementary school, Alex gained the skills needed to join her husband’s business of designing Web sites and Web-based materials, Lauren was hired for a new position that provided her a \$6,000 pay increase, and Belle began a new job and supplemented her salary with income she earned teaching online courses for a company that provides professional development. Adah, who had severe bouts of sickness for nine months of her pregnancy, was hired to teach at a university after completing her degree, and she commented, “I have a job I could not have gotten without the degree, and I have a degree I could not have gotten if it had not been offered online.” The online program was the first contact some of the women had with other professionals in their fields who shared similar philosophies and experienced similar challenges in the workplace, and many of them continue to communicate and share with people in the field who they met in the online program. The credibility these women earned with a master’s degree was imperative to their professional careers. Denise, a director of distance learning at a community college, gained credibility to speak authoritatively about online learning with faculty and administrators at her institution. Similarly, Regina needed credibility when she taught adults. Meira also found that those she worked with respected her added expertise.

Personal Development

Personal development is one outcome of earning an online degree and includes the potential for women to expand capabilities, increase their ability to lead long and healthy lives, cultivate their talents and interests, and live in dignity and with self-respect (Moghadam, 1994). People have a lasting desire to improve themselves and satisfy their needs (Rothwell et al., 1995), and often the need for competence, relatedness and autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2000) motivates women to return to education. Women evaluate returns to education in terms not only of the income, status, and career opportunities it may provide, but of their education's potential to enhance the quality of their personal, familial, and community lives (Mickelson, 2003; von Prummer, 2000). Cultural influences often play a significant role in the decision of women to seek or not to seek education (Mihelich & Storrs, 2003). Doing so may cause them to be regarded in their culture as being less than the ideal woman or on the "fringes of womanhood" (Mihelich & Storrs, 2003, p. 419). Yet, because "there is a strong link between the parents' level of education and that of their children's entry into first-professional and doctoral programs" (Mullen et al., 2003, p. 150), many women return to education to become role models for their children. Women are often motivated to fulfill their educational goals by a sense of mission or a disorienting dilemma in their lives that leads to intense self-examination and critical assessment of knowledge belief systems, power, social relationships, and presuppositions (Kroth & Boverie, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). At times, they may return to education for reasons that are not easily explained (Kingston et al., 2003). There may be a great deal of internal conflict for women about

the multiple roles they must balance, at the expense of their own sense of self, and even ten years after graduating from college may still be in the process of defining themselves (Smulyan, 2004).

The women in this study reported significant gains in self-respect and confidence, and these were highly valued outcomes of the educational experience. Women in this study described how they had missed earlier rites of passage in education, felt they were being left behind in the workplace, or were unsure of their potential, and earning the online degree helped them gain a sense of pride and accomplishment. This also allowed them to more confidently perform in their current jobs, seek new employment, or to pursue another degree. Seven of the women in the study reported that they gained the confidence to enter or apply for admission to a doctorate degree. Three were enrolled in face-to-face doctoral programs at brick and mortar institutions at the time of their interview for this study. One was enrolled in an online doctoral program offered by a public, Research I institution in the South at the time of her interview. Another participant, at the time of the interview, was in the process of applying to an online doctorate program offered by a public, brick and mortar institution in the Northeast. And, two other participants have notified me very recently that they are applying to face-to-face doctoral programs.

One of the driving forces behind the motivation in these women to earn a master's degree was to serve as a role model for their children. One of the participants, who was completing her Ph.D. at the time of her interview, said she was aware that the educational level of the parents had an impact on the educational attainment of children.

This belief was supported in the literature for this study (Mullen et al., 2003). Participants also reported that earning the degree benefited their children in terms of evident financial improvement for the entire family. One participant said her son, after seeing the financial impact of her degree on their family, commented to her that “learning pays.” Primarily, however, these women emphasized that they struggled to attain their degrees in order to depict themselves as a “learning mommy” for whom “learning never stops.”

As these women completed their degrees and experienced professional and personal gains, they noticed that their actions had an impact on others in their immediate or extended family units. Taylor was the first to describe this phenomenon. “I found it’s a domino effect if one woman stands up and does it,” she related, because her husband subsequently enrolled in an online degree program, and her sister-in-law returned to college for a nursing degree. Aileen’s mother enrolled in, and completed, an online master’s degree after seeing Aileen complete her degree.

Several of the participants of the study experienced changes in relationships with members of their family. Taylor, who described her parents as “toxic,” found that her relationship with her mother improved after Taylor earned the master’s degree. It “closed a gap” that had been between them since Taylor left home in high school to live with relatives and friends. On the other hand, Lauren said people in her small, rural community made derogatory comments after she earned the degree; they suggested she might feel she was “too good” to live among them. Lauren responded, “Certain cultures don’t want you to do better because they feel they lose you.” Aileen, a single parent, and

her daughter came to a better understanding about Aileen's desire to earn a doctorate degree; after seeing her mother complete the master's online, Aileen's daughter no longer objected to Aileen's decision to earn an online doctoral degree.

The participants in this study shared experiences that confirmed their fears that even with added credentials they would likely face varying forms of discrimination in the workplace. All but two of these women agreed with the statement, "Men get evaluated based on their potential, women based on their performance" (Noe, 2002, p. 348). When Lauren started a new job, she was replaced by a man who did not have the master's degree or years of experience but was given more than a \$6,000 raise, and her former employer admitted to Lauren that she did not receive, nor would she ever have received, that raise while she was holding the position because she was a female.

Belle watched as a man who was brought into the school district where she works was groomed and prepared to be moved up "when a position became available," she explained. Meira noted that in other departments at her university, "you can see there are males who are promoted based on potential rather than performance." Taylor suggested if a woman is being considered for a promotion, they look at her past performance because "a woman has to show what she can do," as opposed to a man often being promoted based on his potential. Martha said there are so few men in her field that "if a man shows an interest, he is eased into a position." Cara said when she graduated and searched for a job, she found that many prospective employers could not apply her skills and her potential to their particular context. She attributed this to a

philosophy that is often the default among both men and women that she categorized as, “A woman can only do certain things, and men can do anything.”

Transformational Change in Some Participants

As women continue to redefine themselves well after their initial graduation from college, initiation of a family, and entry into a career (Smulyan, 2004), they often turn to education to stabilize their lives. This is often prompted by a need to improve their career options, a personal crisis, a psychological need for self-assessment and examination of meaning perspectives, or the need to fulfill a mission. The women in this study began the path to learning for tangible outcomes – gains in their career or personal gains such as self-confidence and credibility – but some of them experienced significant and unexpected change as a result of the learning. This transformation of their values, beliefs, assumptions, and the way they saw themselves in the world, was a culmination of their emotional, psychological, and intellectual readiness for change. According to Mezirow (1978):

Maturity may be seen as a developmental process of movement through the adult years toward meaning perspectives that are progressively more inclusive, discriminating and more integrative of experience. In ascending this gradient toward fuller maturity, we move, if we can, toward perspectives that are more universal and better able to deal with abstract relationships, that more clearly identify psychocultural assumptions shaping our actions and causing our needs, that provide criteria for more principled value judgments, enhance our sense of

agency or control and give us a clearer meaning and sense of direction in our lives. (p. 106)

The women in this study came to a crossroad in their lives when they engaged in critical reflection initiated by the immediate learning but which ultimately involved their own life experiences, and then they shared their critical reflections with others.

For six of the women in this study, the learning brought them to a decision to alter their way of thinking, living, and acting, and they would not be the same afterward. These six women were drawn into online learning by its accessibility, flexibility, and self-directed learning opportunities, but they emerged as individuals who acknowledged that they had experienced heightened awareness about themselves, made the decision to openly embrace newly discovered truths about themselves in order to become a new individual, overcame resistance to their attempt to redefine themselves, and later, in retrospect, affirmed their altered personality and identity.

Transformational Learning Theory is based on the identification of “perspective transformation” (Mezirow, 2000, p. xi). As previously noted, Mezirow (2004) also suggested, “The fully developed learner moves through a series of developmental forms to arrive at the highest potential for understanding the *capacity* to engage in transformative learning” (p. 69). In the recent literature, authors suggested transformational learning includes authenticity, autonomy, and the ability to overcome distortions of perception and communication (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Moore, 2005).

The paths of transformation may be different for different learners. Some may experience a crisis or experience that prompts the learner to engage in critical reflection

or to change his or her meaning perspective (Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Other learners, however, may experience an “integrating circumstance” (Clark, 1993a) which provides a missing piece in their lives. This may lead to an altered frame of reference, or change in one’s values, beliefs, and assumptions (Merriam, 2004; Mezirow, 1998). Transformation may be preceded by loss which then leads to uncertainty, awareness that there is no turning back to old perspectives, and change that leads to transformation (McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Paths of transformation may include those which are productive and instrumental, personal, emancipatory, and holistic and ecological (McWhinney & Markos, 2003). Or, according to Cranton and Roy (2003), paths of transformation may be epistemic, sociolinguistic, psychological, moral-ethical, and philosophical.

Taylor (2007) suggested that transformative learning theory seeks to identify not only the settings and stages of transformation, but also “factors that shape the transformative experience and how it can be fostered in practice” (p. 185). Specifically, the researcher sought to identify elements within the online environment that contributed to transformational outcomes among women in this study, and, in addition, the researcher sought to identify the stages of their transformation. As pointed out in Chapter IV, most of the participants experienced enhancement of career opportunities, increased self-confidence, improved self-concept, and changes in relationships with other; however, only a third of the women experienced change that was classified by the researcher as self-actualizing or transformative.

Self-actualization and Significant Learning. Rogers (1961) described changes that indicate self-actualization and significant learning:

1. The person comes to see herself differently.
2. She accepts herself and her feelings more fully.
3. She becomes more self-confident and self-directing. She becomes more the person she would like to be.
4. She changes in her basic personality characteristics, in constructive ways.

(Rogers, 1961, p. 280)

Symbolic Growth Experience. Frick (1987) described changes that may lead to transformation as Symbolic Growth Experience, “significant moments in life when we create personal meaning by symbolizing our immediate experience in the interest of heightened awareness and personal growth” (Frick, 1987, p. 406). For six of the women in this study, the learning was a Symbolic Growth Experience, a “conscious perception of the symbolic-metaphorical dimension of immediate experience leading to heightened awareness, the creation of meaning, and personal growth” (Frick, 1990, p. 68). Self-reflection led these participants to a “vital learning experience” (Frick, 1987, p. 411) and the creation of “new symbolic forms and meaning.

According to Frick (1987), “The major source of these symbolic transformations comes from a creative process within the person” (p. 411). For some participants, the learning became part of a newly developed self that was interwoven with the experience, illustrating that “when new symbolic forms emerge and new meaning is created, the Gestalt of the personality is changed. The previous pattern is altered in its dynamics and

complexity” (Frick, 1987, p. 420). Frick (1987) emphasized, “The symbolic growth experience becomes a profound learning experience and, therefore, a powerful catalyst for dynamic change and growth” (pp. 412-413).

Transformative Convergence Outcomes. There was support in the literature to analyze the transformation of some women in this study, identify factors which contributed to and amplified their transformation, and to distinguish the paths of their experience of self-actualization, symbolic growth experience, and transformation. In general, Mezirow (1978) pointed out that transformation is “often gained through an increased sense of competency and through a supportive social climate in which provisional tries are encouraged with minimum risk” (p. 107).

As noted by several participants in this study, the online environment was a safer environment that prompted greater participation because of their perception of the reduced risk in making contributions. Evidence was also provided in the literature to distinguish other factors which may contribute to transformative learning in the online environment. These factors included critical reflection, self-direction, articulation, critical discourse, and social constructivist principles in an environment led by a facilitator who provides supportive feedback, all of which can take place in the online environment (Bostock & Lizhi, 2005; Boyer et al., 2006; Dabbagh, 2004; Dooley et al., 2005; Dooley & Wickersham, 2007; Downing & Chim, 2004; Halio, 2004; Richardson & Newby, 2006; Rovai & Baker, 2005; Taylor, 2007; Wickersham & Dooley, 2006).

According to Taylor (2007), there are factors in the online environment which contribute to a transformative learning experience, and these include:

- emphasis on a great deal of writing,
- the life experiences of the participants,
- time to reflect on intellectual and emotional connections in class discussions.

As described in Chapter IV, participants of this study noted in their perspectives of the learning that benefits of the online learning environment included the opportunity to reflect, discuss, and write their responses. The responses were initiated by the learning, but they became heavily dependent upon, and interwoven with, their own life experiences.

Figure 3 illustrates some of the transformative elements of the online environment as described by participants in this study. Particularly, the women of this study valued the mental stimulation of an environment where learning resources were at their fingertips, greater opportunity for independent thought and reflection, and the instructor guided learning in a more democratic fashion than they had experienced in lecture-based courses. They commented that the environment was safer, less hostile, more diverse, and they contributed more through writing because of the environment, which prompted them to then spend more hours in reflection and sharing with peers. They also felt they were more connected to fellow learners and the instructors in a “mind-to-mind” context which was less culturally situated and biased. Opportunities for rapid, one-on-one communication linked students to one another and to instructors, and learners were provided more opportunities to shape learning with their own life experiences.

TRANSFORMATIVE ELEMENTS IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

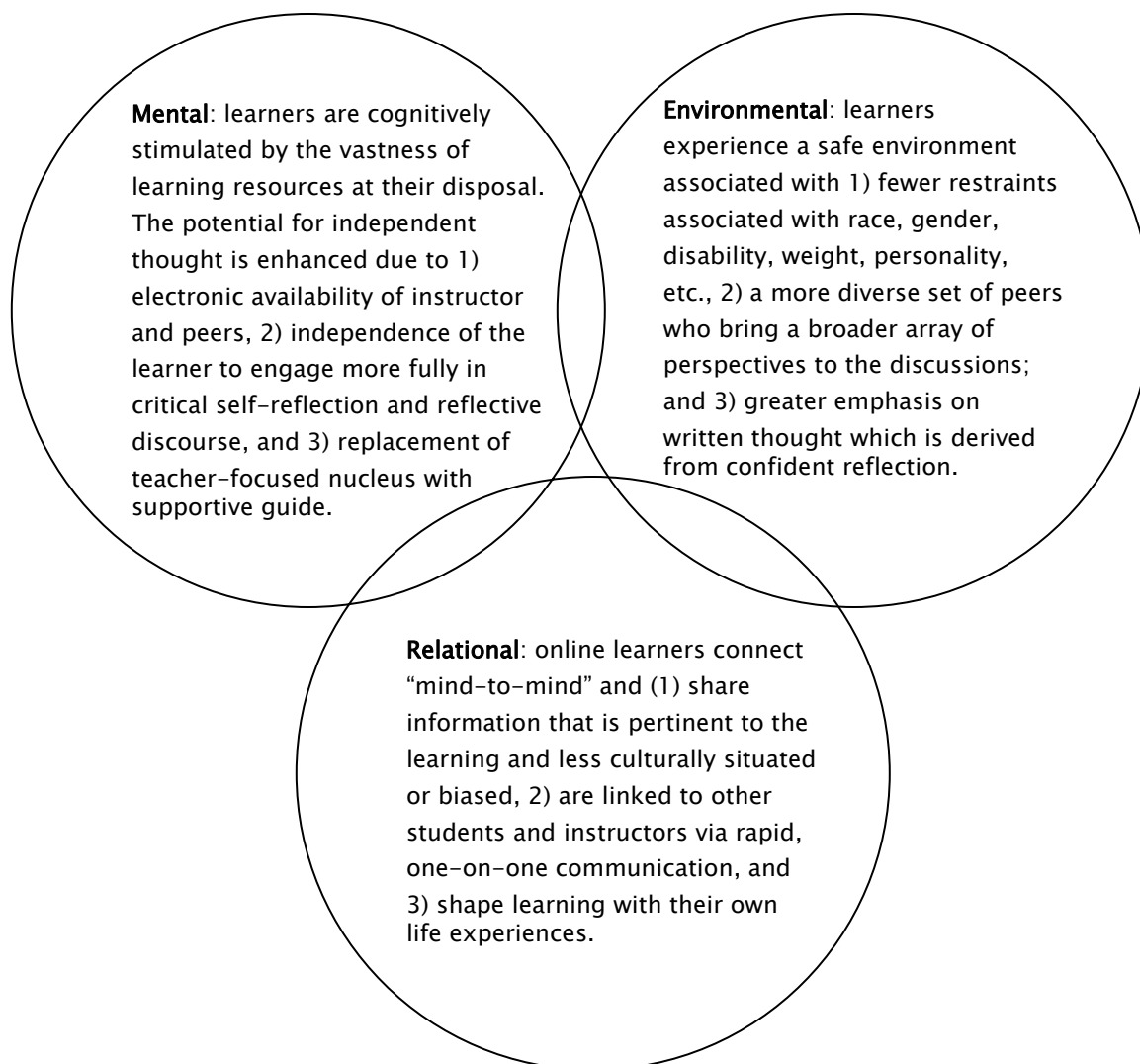


Figure 3

Weatherly Model of Transformative Elements in the Online Environment

Another important factor in transformation is that of resistance. Resistance, defined previously as the natural force which opposes the process of becoming, has a significant role in shaping the outcomes for women in online learning. According to Compton et al. (2006), “the majority of adult students are led back to higher education due to a major life transition, such as divorce, widowhood, or career change” (p. 74). Crises such as these were not necessarily the obvious motivators which led the participants of this study back to higher education. Although crisis had been a part of the lives of some of these women, and resistance to their advancement had been deeply engrained in their lives, many of them experienced resistance without sensing its presence. Not until they engaged in the critical reflection of online learning, and gained confidence in their ability to contribute intellectually, did they become aware of the denial of their true self, the erosion of their self-concept, or the role others played in suppressing their identity as a capable person. It wasn’t until they faced significant resistance to their advancement *during* the learning process that they recognized, and confronted, the broader incidence of resistance that had surrounded them for a prolonged period of time. This “integrating circumstance” (Clark, 1993a) reshaped them.

As noted previously, Mihelich and Storrs (2003) found that women living in a limiting culture can choose to push against their culture in order to pursue education. Kuhn (1962) pointed out that resistance against the goal of becoming a more confident, authentic individual plays a role in the refinement and momentum of the potential change. For some of the women in this study, resistance came from other individuals, such as family members, but for others, the resistance to the notion of transformation

emanated from within. Ultimately, however, the decision to overcome the resistance contributed to their heightened perception of themselves and allowed them to embrace the possibility of becoming a different individual. In comparing transformative education to a Navaho healing ritual about death and rebirth, McWhinney and Markos (2003) found:

There are conditions that support changes, processes that initiate them, and ones that complete the changes. . . . The condition that fosters a person's, organization's, or culture's search for new meanings is often one of loss, a loss of support for what has been, or the awareness that one can no longer turn back. This crisis unfreezes the person to accept the loss and begin a search that takes one across the threshold into a space where one can risk deep exploration, a space in which the exploration is free of immediate threats and consequences . . . a place that is on the threshold but neither here nor there. Existing in this liminal space are the archetypal conditions that vessel transformations of individuals, communities, and societies. There, learning transforms in radical, irreversible, and often unexpected ways. The conditions for such change may occur by accident or intentional plan, or may emerge from the natural rhythm of life. They lead the traveler to let go of assumptions and wander in the transformative space, free from expectations and ego identity. (p. 21)

The willingness to overcome resistance, when it pushed against these women, led them to a place of change. For some, this was accompanied by a sense of sadness and loss as they made difficult decisions to alter relationships, yet there was also a sense of

exhilaration that they finally found the “missing piece” (Clark, 1993a, p. 81) in their lives. The role that resistance can play in the decisions involved in the transformative process is illustrated in Figure 4.

The driving forces which prompted a return to higher education for these participants were primarily:

- to complete a goal and compensate for a missed rite of passage in education (Regina)
- to redefine herself and begin a new career (Paige, Adah, Alex, Kim, Belle, Stella)
- to find answers to challenges in her current position (Dedra)
- to gain credibility with other administrators, faculty, or co-workers and complete her educational goals (Denise, Meira)
- to meet requirements of her employer (Marion)
- to advance out of a dead-end job and into an administrative position (Diana, Martha, Taylor)
- to better support her daughter as a single parent by advancing professionally (Aileen)
- to prove to herself she could succeed in an intellectual pursuit (Lauren, Gillian)
- to secure a full-time job in the unique profession she loved (Cara)

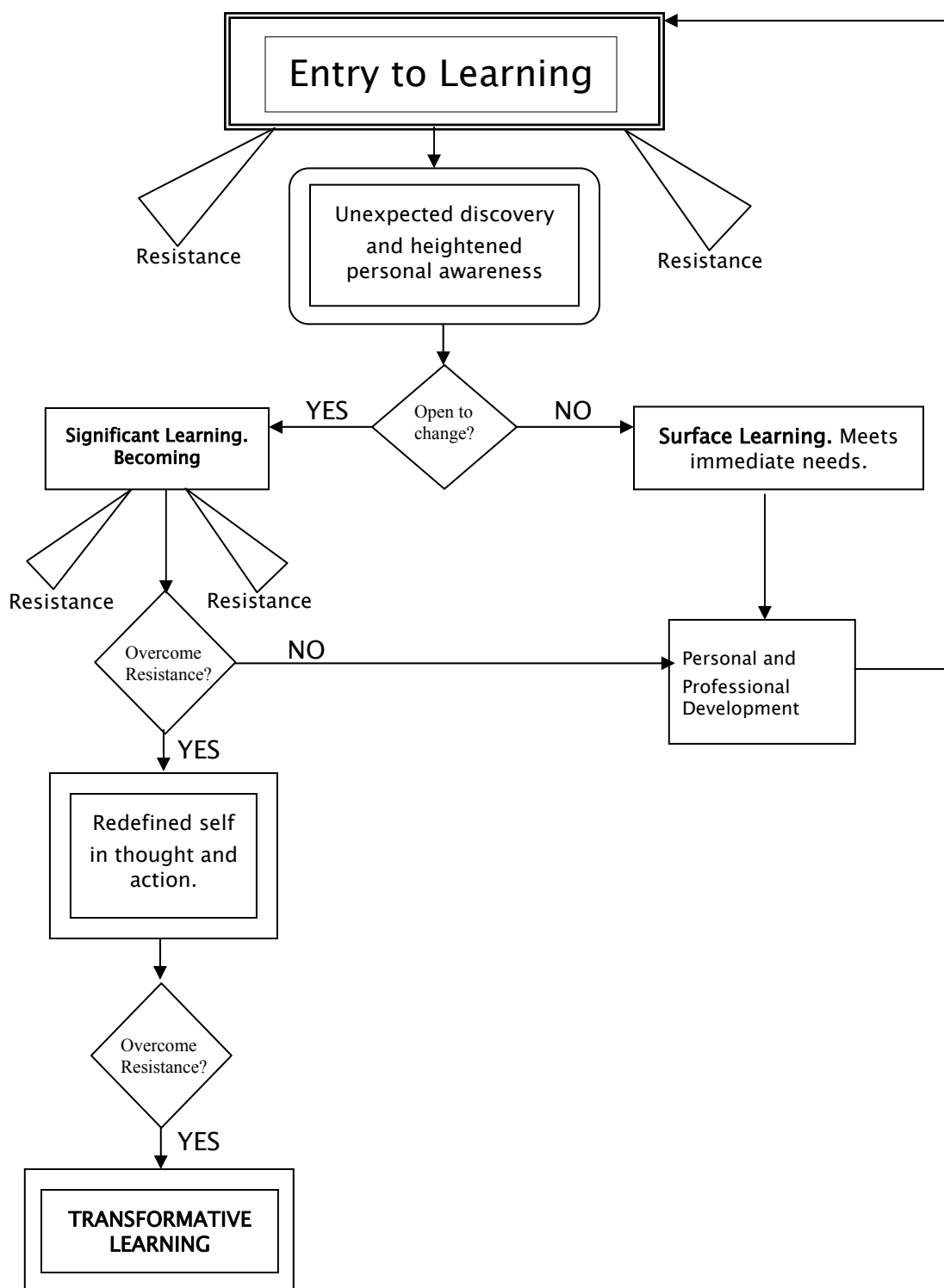


Figure 4
The Role of Resistance

The events that preceded these decisions were varied, but the women who experienced the most significant transformation arrived at a place of change and confronted themselves; they realized their past and the forces which prevented them from self-actualization had to be overcome at this point in their lives.

For Marion, family members suggested she was “ego-tripping” by earning a master’s degree, and, because she was an African-American woman, she wasn’t confident her intellectual contributions could be accepted without being colored by race or ethnicity. The master’s changed her and provided the confidence she needed to eventually earn a Ph.D. Dedra’s self-concept had been shaped by a spouse who led her to believe she was not as smart as he, a medical doctor. She earned the master’s, left her husband, started a new career, and found the missing piece in her life—self-respect.

Paige overcame resistance hurled upon her by her family to ultimately “self-actualize” and begin a new career teaching at a university and conducting research on an international scale. Diana overcame the self-doubt that grew inside her from years of violent physical abuse from her spouse, and she found through the online master’s experience that her goal to help battered and abused women would include giving them skills to earn an online degree. Gillian overcame her initial fear of online learning, learned to love it, and now is resolutely determined to overcome resistance that is rooted in societal bias in academia that threatens to disqualify her and the credentials she is earning through an online doctoral program. Stella overcame resistance from within herself. Her former perspective was to live within the existing parameters of her life as wife and entrepreneur and reject the person she was becoming in the academic world.

She chose a new perspective which led her to leave her former life because, as she said, “the kind of awareness that it brought to me . . . shifted my priorities so profoundly. . . . I really thought I would take these classes and learn something, and I ended up with it re-engineering my entire life as a result.” Finally, the author, Gail, overcame resistance that manifested itself in self doubt, restrictive patriarchal and cultural views, and hegemonic intervention that threatened progress toward the master’s and Ph.D.

The six women who experienced a level of change categorized as self-actualizing and significant learning, symbolic growth experience, and transformation provided a description of their life changes before, during, and after the online learning. As a result of analyzing the transcripts of these women, four distinct phases became apparent to the researcher. These were common among all six of the participants who exhibited the most dramatic perspective transformations. The outcomes of learners progressing through the phases referred to as transformative convergence were categorized by the researcher as:

- (1) an unexpected discovery leading to heightened personal awareness that resulted from the learning experience,
- (2) an openness to change and the process of becoming,
- (3) a willingness to overcome internal or external resistance in order to redefine self, and
- (4) a retrospective affirmation of altered personality and identity.

Figure 5 depicts the transformative convergence outcomes in the context of women in this particular study.

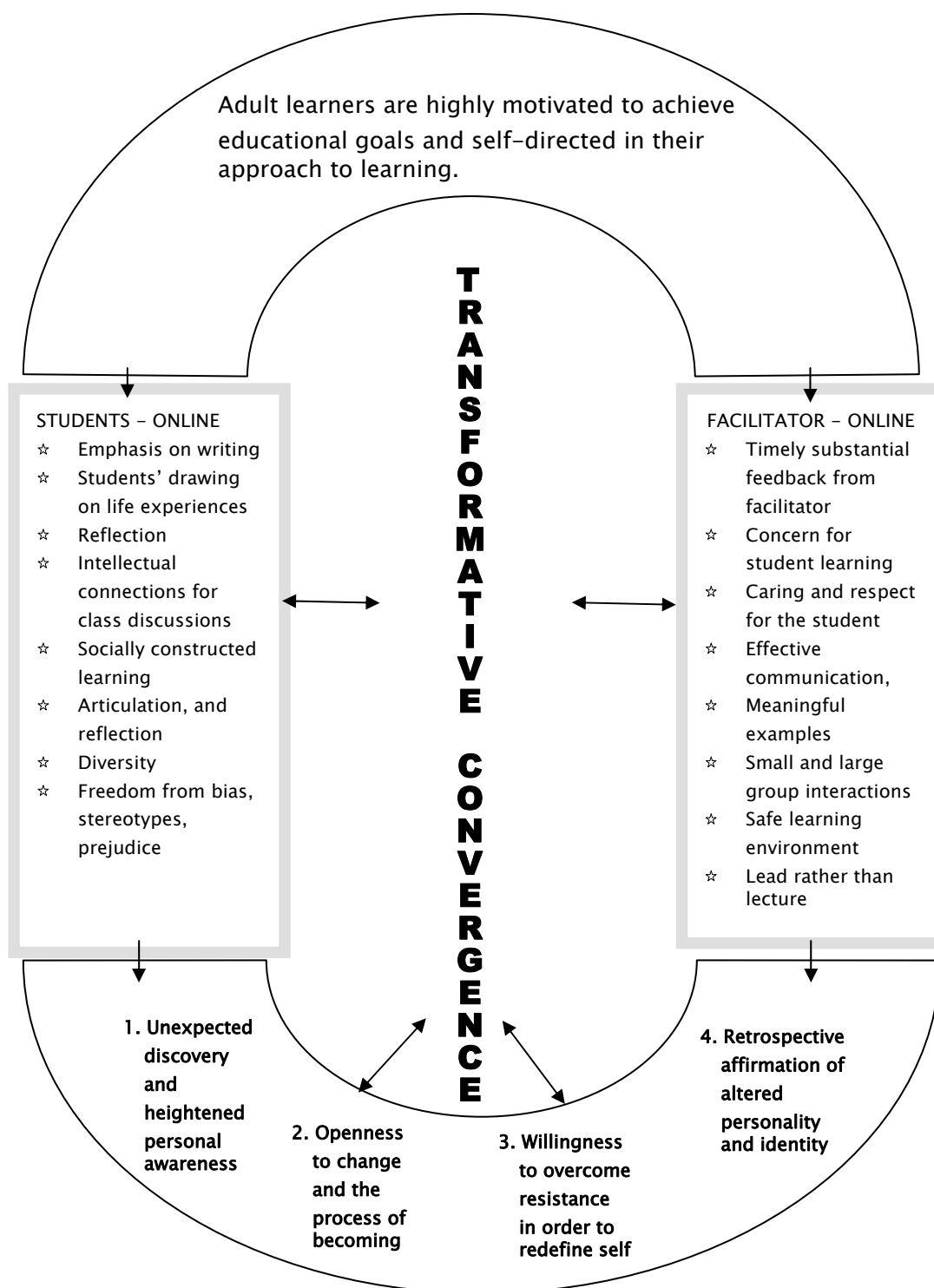


Figure 5
Transformative Convergence Outcomes of Online Learning

The development of women and the transformational outcomes that may result from women earning an online degree, particularly American women, have not been sufficiently addressed by current research. A better understanding of the transformation women experience both personally and professionally as a result of earning an online degree may lead higher education to examine its current practices in the design and delivery of online courses and programs, to examine the degree to which distance education is gendered at all levels, from administration to instruction, to elaborate upon the benefits of online education for women, to provide deeper insight regarding the growing demand for online education among women seeking flexible educational opportunities, and to focus attention on the need for more representation of women in the administration of distance education at the university level.

In short, the findings of this study may: 1) encourage other women to consider online education, 2) inform higher education institutions in the design and development of online programs, and (3) underscore the need for greater representation of women in the administration of distance education at the university level. As Rajasingham (2006) noted:

There is an urgent need to redress the imbalance of women in the higher levels of academic leadership by adapting their structures, strategies, processes, and assumptions to respond to changing social needs and expectations. Merely adding the slogan to advertisements for staff vacancies that “We are committed to equal opportunity. Women are encouraged to apply” is perceived by women as mere rhetoric, often not reflected in empirical data. (pp. 34-35)

Also, from this knowledge, then, should spring further research questions:

- How can online distance education be structured to be less threatening and more supportive of women facing personal challenges?
- How can distance education administrators and online instructors be encouraged to adopt an ethic of care?
- How can online instructors be encouraged to place support of the online learner as a higher priority than technological expertise?
- How can institutions of higher education anticipate the challenges unique to women in higher education and better provide support systems to tutor them and provide ongoing feedback?
- How can relationships among women learners be fostered in the online learning environment?
- How can higher education improve the representation of women in the administration of distance education at the university level?
- How does online course design reflect the needs of women?
- How can we encourage women students to take charge of their own learning?

These questions are directed toward the provision of potentially transforming educational opportunities for women through online distance education; however, global questions arise as to the feasibility of higher education transforming itself in order to meet the challenge of educational provision to serve a population clamoring for greater flexibility. In 1997 Dede predicted:

We're going to see more change in higher education during the next decade than we've seen in the past two centuries. . . . If we're not prepared for the implications of this transformation, both for face-to-face instruction and for distance education, we're going to have things imposed on us that we may not care for. Furthermore, the term *distance education* will be out-moded ten years from now. There won't be any such thing as face-to-face education, either. There's just going to be something called distributed learning, which is sometimes face-to-face, sometimes across distance and sometimes involves teaching-by-telling, but often involves other kinds of pedagogy that aren't now part of our repertoire, yet are needed to prepare people for the incredibly chaotic knowledge-based society we seem to be moving into. (p. 16)

In 1997, the governors of nineteen western states shared concerns about the rising costs of higher education, population growth, unskilled graduates, learning technologies that were not fully utilized to offer education across the region, and state systems of higher education that were unresponsive to their concerns. Their solution was the establishment of Western Governors University (WGU). An accredited University focused entirely on distance education, WGU was designed to be student-centered, networked with other teaching institutions for the purpose of sharing courses and resources, and competency-based (Johnstone, 2005). Currently, WGU "enrolls nearly 4,000 students and is currently adding about 2,000 students a year. . . . The average age of WGU students is 39. Two-thirds of them are women. More than 70% of the students work full-time" (Johnstone, 2005, p. 26). Similarly, as previously discussed, 56% of the 200,000 students enrolled in

the University of Phoenix are women, and 40% are minority students (Selingo, 2005, p. 2).

Will the brick and mortar institutions of higher education reposition themselves to serve women through online distance education? Will they promote a pedagogy that provides “the conditions that give students the opportunity to speak with their own voices, to authenticate their own experiences” (Giroux, 1983, p. 203)? Christine von Prummer (2000), a senior researcher at the FernUniversität [Distance University] who has carried out cross-national research on women in distance education for more than 20 years, has reported many factors that hamper women’s ability to complete an education. Yet, she said distance education has not modified itself based on these findings in order to better serve women.

In the face of these findings which, moreover, are replicated year after year in new evaluation studies, it may seem strange that I talk about the changes which distance education offers to women. Am I whistling in the dark trying to convince myself that all is well? Or can we really challenge the existing distance teaching system to become less androcentric and more women-friendly? (von Prummer, 2000, pp. 200-201)

To summarize the need for change in higher education to meet women’s growing need for online distance education, I refer to two fundamental and philosophical ways of approaching change as described by Monica Lee (2001). The first is a Parmenidean view—a “being” ontology that resists change and adheres to the known reality; the second is a Heraclitean view—a “becoming” ontology that values an emergent world and change.

The Parmenidean view of reality is reflected in the dominance of science, perpetrating a “system of classificatory taxonomies, hierarchies and categories which, in turn, serve as the institutional vocabulary for representing our experiences of reality” (Lee, 2001, p. 330). On the other hand, the Heraclitean view proposes “how an entity *becomes* constitutes *what* the actual entity *is*, so the two descriptions of an actual entity are not independent. Its being is constituted by its becoming” (Lee, 2001, p. 330).

Despite the appearance of security, there is danger in adherence to the “being” ontology:

The Parmenidean house of cards that we construct around us to provide clarity, certainty and delineation will tumble in the wind of close examination. This house of cards stands on the strength of unique definitions by which every concept has its own, rightful and static place in the order of things. In contrast, from the Heraclitean perspective, the meaning and boundary of concepts is negotiable. (Lee, 2001, p. 331)

The question remains, does higher education value “being” or “becoming”? Does it wish to “shape” people to fit its current organizational structure so they will “be” a representative of the institution, or does it want to provide an arena for transformation and empowerment so that people “become” equipped to continue the process of emergent development? Does higher education want to embrace change to meet the growing needs of society, and, for the purposes of this paper, women, who are seeking online education? Or, does it wish to remain fixed and immobile? If so, is the illusion of permanence only a house of cards?

Burke (1982) said it this way: “Ignoring an organization’s dependence on its environment risks planting the seeds for bankruptcy or extinction” (p. 73). The larger issue may actually be higher education’s aloofness to the fundamental idea of nurturing individuals. Martin (2000), in describing the history of higher education as being shaped by the Platonic ideals promoting reasoning, objectivity, and emotional distance, concluded:

The underside of an academy that tolerates the 3Cs of care, concern, and connection as they relate to ideas but not to other people, other living things, or the earth itself is a society whose trained intellectuals do not know how to respond directly to human needs, indeed do not even see the value of trying to do so. (p. 131)

There is further evidence that higher education is not responding to the needs of women. Many of the women in this study who said they are waiting to enroll in a doctorate are doing so because they want to enroll in an online Ph.D. program, and higher education, for the most part, has not met this demand. In 1998, Stalker and Prentice found that women comprised the majority of all undergraduate students (56.1%), yet were awarded only one-third (35.4%) of the doctorates, and by 2004, the number of women doctorate recipients had risen to only 45.3% (The Nation, 2006). Despite the need for increased online access to higher degrees, higher education remains reluctant to offer many terminal degrees (Ed.D. and Ph.D.) online. Are these the icons of knowledge – power – that the academy refuses to relinquish to the masses? The women interviewed for this study voiced their desire for online doctorate degrees offered by accredited universities. One participant said:

Most working adults can't just up and leave their jobs. Why should I be limited to what is offered here? If there is a degree offered at another university, shouldn't I be able to get that degree, too? I want a Ph.D. from a university that is accredited, has a brick and mortar school, and has a reputation.

Yet, women may not be able to locate an online doctorate of their choice. I tried to gather for this dissertation the number of online Ph.D. programs offered by accredited public, nonprofit universities in the United States.

I began by emailing the state's higher education coordinating board in April 2007, and I was told to contact the six regional accrediting bodies for higher education in the United States. I subsequently emailed the six accrediting agencies and asked how I might find the number of online Ph.D. programs offered by accredited public, nonprofit universities in the United States. I either received no response or, on one occasion, received a curt email that my request was not specific enough to be statistically accurate. This was surprising since I had not indicated that the information was to be part of a statistical analysis; I simply approached the question as the participants in my study approached it – as a woman who had earned an online master's degree and wanted to pursue an online Ph.D. I realized that the information was highly inaccessible or not available, just as the participants in my study had indicated.

The growth in online education leaves one wondering why this is the case. “Higher education institutions taught nearly 3.2 million online students during the fall of 2005, an increase of about 850,000 students and a growth rate of 35 percent” (Allen & Seaman, 2006, p. 5). In addition, a recent survey (Allen & Seaman, 2006) of academic

leaders in higher education indicated 62% rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face education, and an overwhelming number (73%) agreed with the statement that online education serves students who would not otherwise be served by face-to-face programs (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Yet, those academic leaders acknowledged there are still significant barriers to the widespread adoption of online learning in higher education.

The most significant barriers cited by the academic leaders were as follows: 64% percent said students need more discipline in online courses; 26% said there is a lack of acceptance of online instruction by faculty that “puts significant limits on how rapidly their online programs can grow” (Allen & Seaman, 2006, p. 12); and 32% said the time and effort required to teach online “is a barrier to widespread adoption of online learning” (Allen & Seaman, 2006, p. 13). Furthermore, there is disheartening evidence that Gillian’s personal assessment of bias against an online doctoral degree is accurate. Adams and DeFleur (2005) surveyed 109 academic search committee chairs and found that when asked to choose between recommending an applicant with a traditional degree and one with an online degree, “98% of the chairs chose the candidate with the traditional degree” (p. 78). Only one of the respondents selected the candidate who had earned an online degree. And, when comparing an applicant with a traditional degree to one with a degree that was earned partially online, “the traditional degree is valued overwhelmingly compared to one earned partially online (94% compared to 16%)” (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, p. 78). The general outcome of the aforementioned study was not favorable for those earning an online doctorate degree:

Overall, from the quantitative results, it seems clear that those applying for a faculty position in the institutions included in this analysis would have virtually no prospect of gaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online. Moreover, their chances would be slim if a sizable part of their course work had been completed online – even though they had a doctorate awarded by a traditional institution. (Adams & DeFleur, 2005, p. 79)

If online educational opportunities are to expand to meet the growing needs of women learners, additional research is needed to:

- shape distance education methodology and implementation in a way that is beneficial for the growing number of women seeking higher education; and
- assess the readiness of higher education to accept the change that accompanies greater utilization of technology for online distance education.

The denial among higher education faculty and administrators of the transformative aspects of online education, and their resistance to accept the legitimacy of learning outcomes from this mode of delivery, may actually foster a more ardent outcry from among those who have experienced its transformative effects. As Kuhn (1962) would have us understand, denial does not overcome what is. Although women still face significant barriers to achieving higher education, this study indicated women are adding the pursuit of education to their busy lives and doing quite well at balancing the added responsibility. They are motivated by such factors as the desire to succeed in a competitive workplace, instill a love of education in their children, improve the lives of

their family members, seek more gratifying careers, prove to themselves they can succeed academically, or achieve autonomy.

There are implications for career counselors and others positioned to influence young women as they consider their career paths. In their study of women's career decisions, Whitmarsh et al. (2007) found that "oftentimes girls experience an early foreclosure of their career options, which restricts their horizons to female-dominated careers. Paradoxically, rather than confirming early career decisions, career counselors need to provide experiences that expand the exploration process" (p. 234). Notably, the resulting recommendations given to counselors to "organize career showcases, develop mentoring programs, and distribute career educational materials for young women and their families" (Whitmarsh et al., 2007, p. 234) did not include a recommendation to inform women about career opportunities that may result from online education, as documented in this study and others (Halio, 2004; Heron, 1997; Kirkup, 1996; Kirkup & von Prummer, 1990; Kramarae, 2001; Leisure, 2007; Lunneborg, 1994; von Prummer, 2000, 2004).

In addition, there are a number of women who engage in online learning and subsequently experience a startling, dramatic personal transformation. Although unanticipated, the learning experience becomes intertwined with a redefining of self and facilitates self-actualization and clarification of who they really are and their mission in life. These are the women who will be prompted to continue to alter their lives and their future goals to reach their full potential—a potential which was only fully understood after achieving the online degree.

Contributions to New Knowledge in Human Resource Development

Swanson and Holton (2001) suggested that “as we enter the twenty-first century, two overriding phenomena rise to the top of the list of challenges facing HRD: globalization and technology” (p. 379). Rajasingham (2006), referring to information and communications technology as a means for women to connect to universities, access education, and capitalize on information and knowledge, said, “Women must therefore learn the skills of using this technology so that they can participate successfully in the knowledge economy” (p. 36). A study released by the American Association of University Women (Dey & Hill, 2007), indicated that although women are gaining greater access to higher education than in previous years, and “choosing to attend college and completing a college degree have strong positive effects on earnings” (p. 2), there is a broadening gap in pay between men and women graduating from college:

One year out of college, women working full time earn only 80% as much as their male colleagues earn. Ten years after graduation, women fall farther behind, earning only 69% as much as men earn. Controlling for hours, occupation, parenthood, and other factors normally associated with pay, college-educated women still earn less than their male peers earn. (Dey & Hill, 2007, p. 2)

In the study, Dey and Hill (2007) pointed to discrimination as a factor in the inequity of pay: “After ten years, variables such as education, training, and experience explained less of the gender pay gap. In other words, more of the gap is unexplained and may be attributed to discrimination” (p. 27).

Women continue to seek higher education to obtain credentials, boost their self-confidence and self-respect, and to gain credibility. Men in the work place continue to be promoted and given leadership positions more readily than women:

Ten years after graduation, male college graduates working full time have more workplace authority than do their female counterparts. Men are more likely to supervise others (66% of men and 54% of women), participate in hiring and firing decisions (51% of men and 38% of women), or set pay rates (29% of men and 18% of women). (Dey & Hill, 2007, pp. 23 – 24)

The broadening of educational opportunities for women as well as the sustained discrimination of women in the work place continue to be issues that challenge human resource development professionals. We are given the challenge to support women's access to more advanced degrees in a flexible online delivery, and then follow up with research that unmasks discriminatory practices that undermine the value of the education women struggled to earn.

The information gained through this study of eighteen women who earned a fully online degree is not definitive; rather, it contributes to a growing body of knowledge in human resource development and distance education that will better equip educators and institutions of higher education as they develop online programs in the number, quality, and design that maximizes support of online learners. HRD seeks to improve “knowledge, expertise, learning, renewal and growth” (Swanson & Holton, 2001, p. 107) that influence and drive the “pattern of work-related experiences that span the course of a person's life” (Noe, 2002, p. 452). Therefore, the information shared by these women

about their learning may be used by other individuals or organizations to encourage development.

Conclusions

If higher education is to meet current and future societal demands for education, it must, as outlined by the Spellings Commission (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), “adapt to a world altered by technology, changing demographics and globalization, in which the higher-education landscape includes new providers and new paradigms, from for-profit universities to distance learning” (p. viii); “harness the power of information technology by sharing educational resources among institutions, and use distance learning to meet the educational needs of rural students and adult learners, and to enhance workforce development” (p. 24); use information technology to “improve student learning, reduce instructional costs, and meet critical workforce needs” (p. 24); expand the reach of higher education “to adults through technology such as distance learning, workplace learning, and alternative scheduling programs” (p. 25); provide students “clearer pathways among educational levels and institutions” (p. 17); and “remove barriers to student mobility and promote new learning paradigms (e.g., distance education, adult education, workplace programs) to accommodate a far more diverse student cohort” (p. 17).

Utilization of Findings to Inform Decisions in Higher Education

Studies such as this one, which gather input from former graduates of online programs, serve to inform the design and implementation of future models of higher education. Women continue to have different career paths than men due to their unique role as caregiver:

Women are on average older when they receive their doctoral degrees; they frequently take longer to complete their studies; they often move around more (to follow their male partner); and women's careers are interrupted to have children whereas men's are not. (Hornosty, 1998, p. 189)

By virtue of developing and offering more online programs, higher education can take steps to accommodate the needs of women as they balance their roles as care giver with their pursuit of higher education.

In order to gain momentum, decision makers in higher education must acknowledge the different groups of learners which they serve. Women who have children, who work full-time, who are remote from a university campus, or who have other demands placed on them requiring greater flexibility when accessing education should be given consideration by administrators in higher education. Such consideration would, no doubt, result in the development and delivery of more online programs in a broad array of fields, including both the master's and Ph.D. levels, to serve this growing population of women. Whereas some authors (Hornosty, 1998) previously called for the implementation of child care facilities to alleviate the demands on women, the

proliferation of online programs, which would allow women to remain in their homes while completing their education, may be a more plausible and desirable solution.

A growing number of women have turned to online education as a means to fulfill their educational goals. For many, this meant overcoming significant barriers, accepting criticism for earning an advanced degree, experiencing conflict in family relationships, or balancing numerous roles at work and at home in order to succeed. However, the women in this study demonstrated through their experiences that overcoming obstacles and earning the online degree proved immensely beneficial.

Rovai and Baker (2005) conducted a study of 281 online graduate students, of which 83.9% were females and 16.1% were males, and found that female participants reflected a stronger sense of community and greater levels of perceived learning than males. Females posted more messages to discussion boards, indicated they felt more connected to other students, indicated they felt their online learning experience was more aligned to their educational values and goals, and perceived they learned more.

The benefit of online education isn't merely access but includes educational effectiveness. Women participated in the courses at higher rates than male students and identified their experience as socially richer (as evidenced from the sense of community) and educationally more effective (as evidenced by perceived learning) than men. (Rovai & Baker, 2005, p. 40)

Notably, for a segment of those who participated in this study of women who earned an online degree, there was a radical perspective transformation that led to altering the direction of their lives. Lange (2004) suggested:

The dialectic of transformative and restorative learning is vital, for it affirms that transformation is not just an epistemological process involving a change in worldview and habits of thinking: it is also an ontological process where participants experienced a change in their being in the world including their forms of relatedness. (p. 137)

Similar to what King (2004) noted, transformational changes among the participants of this study “entailed the adoption of a more inclusive view of themselves, others, and their world” (p. 169).

Mezirow (2004) suggested, “The fully developed learner moves through a series of developmental forms to arrive at the highest potential for understanding - the *capacity* to engage in transformative learning” (p. 69). These women not only engaged in online learning, they had a dramatic change in perspective and “experienced self-emancipation through self-knowledge” (Moore, 2005, p. 401). In general, the women in this study demonstrated a willingness to say, as others have said in a previous study (Redding & Dowling, 1992), “I am important, too; I also must grow; I serve you best if I serve myself as well” (p. 234).

The Growing Body of Knowledge about Online Learning

The experiences of the woman in this study altered my own perspectives about women in online learning and the potential for personal development and transformational outcomes. I learned something unique from each participant. I better understand the need for anonymity in online classes because of Marion. Adah helped me

recognize online learning as an answer for women who suffer from severe morning sickness. Regina taught me that earning an online degree may allow a woman to realize a rite of passage that was missed in earlier years.

Paige beautifully articulated how online learning allows learners who are more introverted and who may prefer writing as a communication tool to flourish and reach their full potential; Paige also demonstrated that women will shape their educational paths regardless of barriers created by higher education. Similarly, Taylor demonstrated a dynamic optimism, independence and an unwillingness to be denied the education of her choice. Dedra taught me that online learning can help a woman become autonomous and find her sense of self-worth.

Alex shared how an online degree prepared her for operating a business with a global perspective. Kim emphasized that women may feel safer in the online learning environment where domineering personalities have less impact and control than they often do in a face-to-face environment. Aileen spoke about the challenges of single mothers and the necessity for more online programs to serve their educational needs. Lauren demonstrated that hitting a glass ceiling can be combated, as in her case, with an online master's degree that netted her credibility and a new career. Martha depicted the caring of women; she voiced her desire to serve as a resource for other women who are seeking information about online learning and who have significant self-doubt about their capabilities to be successful.

Meira spoke from the unique perspective of someone who had accrued credits for her bachelor's degree over a period of 20 years and through many alternative forms of

education. Online education was not yet in existence, and her husband's military career made attendance at a traditional university impossible. Meira understandably lobbied for brick and mortar institutions to offer online Ph.D. programs. Belle, an education specialist and an online instructor in higher education, pointed out that many institutions do not grasp the potential for online learning and the social impact the Internet is having on education.

Cara demonstrated how earning an online degree can prepare learners in the current technology-rich society for jobs that do not exist when they begin the degree. Gillian emphasized that women, when introduced to online learning, may discover a love for online learning so powerful that they may be motivated to enter a doctorate program and start a new career. Stella exemplified the global reach of online learning and the unexpected transformational change that may result from earning an online degree.

Denise suggested that online learning may be a subversive means by which women can obtain an education, even if they have employers or spouses who would psychologically or physically block their pursuit of a degree. And, finally, Diana shared the perspective of a formerly abused woman who utilized education to overcome poverty and helplessness. While interviewing Diana during this study, and when transcribing her taped interview, I was deeply affected by her triumph over an abusive situation, her utilization of education to provide a better life for herself and her two children, and her dedication to providing knowledge and skills to women in shelters so they can earn an online degree. She emphasized that women leaving abusive situations need more than

clothing, food, and shelter to start a new life – they need to be informed about online education and then given skills to be successful as they pursue online degrees. The listening changed my future; I hope to join Diana in seeking ways to help women in transitional housing gain the skills and resources needed to earn an online degree.

My own entry to online education was precipitated by professional survival; I had to have the master's to maintain my position at a university and to earn needed credibility. Yet, in the process of reflecting, discussing, and writing, as with so many of the women who told of their own encounter, online learning unlocked a door within me that ushered in new ways of looking at the world and a new recognition of the power associated with knowledge. As a result of my online master's degree, I became resolute to research the phenomenon of online learning, and particularly the phenomenon of women returning to higher education in the midst of their chaotic, busy lives. My goal in this research was to: 1) contribute to the growing body of knowledge that exists about online learning, and 2) challenge decision makers in higher education to act on behalf of women by facilitating development of a greater number of undergraduate online programs, a greater number of master's and doctorate degrees offered online, and a collaborative spirit in higher education that promotes sharing of information, expertise, and resources for the ultimate benefit of society. I urge higher education institutions to create parameters for accepting and honoring credentials of those who earn online degree programs, discuss the hiring practices that disallow those who have earned an online doctorate from an accredited, public, and respected institution, and define what is needed when hiring faculty to teach online courses and program.

Perhaps, instead of disallowing individuals with online credentials, higher education administrators would be wise to consider *those* applicants to teach in their own online environments. Heightened understanding, by virtue of valuing the lived experiences of those involved in online learning, promotes the development of opportunities for enriching the lives of women and their families. This study points to the growing need for higher education to reposition itself to fully share the knowledge and power of academia with women who need, but cannot access, education. For many such women, their expertise lies untapped, and society is poorer because of it. Perhaps the words and accounts of women in this study will serve to dispel myths, erase uncertainties, and eradicate biases held by decision makers in higher education, and the result will be a collaboration within higher education to examine priorities and make a concerted effort to support women who are on the fringes of our educational system.

In short, I owe a debt of gratitude to each and every woman in this study for allowing me to listen and take away something for myself, something for other women, and something for those who wish to shape distance education. The women in this study spoke with the authority of lived experience, and their narratives encourage distance education policy makers to re-evaluate current practices in distance education, shape dynamic and welcoming online environments, and increase the level and numbers of degree programs offered online. Greater consideration of the cultural and gendered needs of women in online environments has the potential to increasingly facilitate personal development and transformative change in women.

The opportunity I was given to engage in personal inquiry of women in online learning broadened my understanding of the motivation, challenges, and outcomes of women who earned an online degree. However, I recognized during the process that women whose lives have been changed by earning a fully online degree have no well-established forum in which to share their experiences. Until I approached these women, no one had asked the question, “How was your life changed by earning an online degree?” I discovered a rich resource which can benefit society, but the resource is largely unacknowledged. Many more questions need to be asked; many more opportunities to share need to be provided for women who earn an online degree.

My personal journey, my *raison d'être*, has more clearly come into focus. When I completed the bachelor's degree, I put my dream of additional degrees on hold for 17 years. Through online learning, I was able to earn the master's degree, and it was then I developed the motivation to pursue a doctorate degree and research women in online learning. There were no online Ph.D. programs offered by institutions in the state where I live, and out-of-state tuition would have been prohibitive. A missed rite of passage determined my choice of university. In 1980, I was forced to halt progress on my bachelor's degree at Texas A&M University in order to accompany my husband and two small daughters to my husband's duty station at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas. For the Ph.D., I chose to return to A&M. Again, I could easily empathize with participants in this study who ardently and continuously struggled to achieve an elusive educational dream.

Now, 27 years after halting my bachelor's degree, my dream of graduating from Texas A&M is becoming a reality, yet, in the process, I have redefined myself and have

developed new dreams. I offer an analogy. Recently, on a flight from Indianapolis to Houston, I boarded a small jet with only one aisle down the middle, and I was seated in a single seat at the front of the plane. The exit door was just ahead to my left, and the flight attendant was seated slightly behind and to my right. I felt a bit insecure at first, but as I settled in and began gazing out the window, I became elated that I could spend the entire flight without uninvited interruption, as is often the case in the traditional seating arrangement on a plane.

As the plane reached full altitude, I became aware of dramatic changes in the landscape far below me. Colors and patterns were altered; even the contour of the land was more significant from this perspective. Rather than close the small window beside me and pretend I wasn't seeing all the changes below, I focused more intently on the altered landscape and embraced the opportunity to see things as never before. I began to reflect a great deal in my little space. I did wander down the center aisle to visit with a few people at times during the flight, and the airline attendant provided me very individualized attention since I was seated nearest her. Everyone in the plane was flying, but my experience was unique because of my position within the plane. As I left the plane, I was surrounded by others, but I was enriched, I was not the same, because of the thoughts that were mine as I made the journey.

The same was true for me in the online learning environment. I was a bit nervous at first to enter a new kind of learning environment, but I quickly realized I was uniquely situated to spend more time reflecting, writing, and examining my beliefs, values, and perspectives. When I wanted to connect with others, they seemed to be closer, more

easily accessed than in the past. And, as I reflected on the learning, I noted changes in myself and my perspectives. I never closed the window to the change taking place; instead, I embraced it and searched more intently within and discovered new insights, new meanings, a redefinition of my faith, and a new me. It was from that experience that I gained the confidence to seek more education in a doctorate program. Although I was required to spend time in a classroom environment, I was well-positioned by my online learning experienced for that independent, personal, and very reflective space I've come to treasure.

The power of an environment that supports intellectual growth and transformation cannot be overstated. In my online master's program, I entered a learning environment which honored and welcomed my lived experience as part of the learning. Encouraged, I entered the doctoral program and was supported by a network of people who believed in me and fostered continuation of a transformation that I never planned nor could have foreseen. I acknowledge that the essence of unleashing expertise in others, perhaps the essence of transformational learning, begins with an ethic of care.

What are my goals? I want to encourage other women to believe in themselves and pursue an education. The 74-year-old woman who transcribed several of the interviews for this study emailed me that she re-entered college in the Fall of 2007 to complete her bachelor's degree because she was inspired by the accounts of women in this study. This is evidence of the domino effect that occurs when accounts of online learning are shared among women.

In my future, I plan to continue research of the personal development and transformational outcomes of various groups of individuals who sought and earned an online degree for various reasons such as disfigurement, disability, race, illness or treatment for severe illness, age, language barrier, obesity, physical abuse, pregnancy, or incarceration. I want to support the development of a forum for women who have earned an online degree, press for changes in higher education to better accommodate women learners, and volunteer to assist victims of abuse by providing them knowledge and skills to seek online educational opportunities. Online education provided me a gateway to knowledge, and with knowledge has come a level of understanding that opportunities associated with educational attainment may not be known *a priori*. Believing that you can *become* must initiate the steps, and, I share the sentiment of women who participated in this study that the outcomes of earning an online degree surpass expectations.

Implications for Future Research

The accounts of personal development and transformation of women earning an online master's degree suggest a number of topics that require further research. More research is needed regarding the personal development and transformational outcomes of women earning online degrees at all levels, including bachelor's, master's, and doctorate degrees. There are a growing number of virtual institutions which offer fully online degrees, and there are online degrees being offered by brick and mortar institutions.

Research needs to be conducted regarding the different outcomes and experiences of learners engaged with different types of institutions. Is there a difference

in the experiences of online learners enrolled in online degrees offered by traditional brick and mortar institutions versus the experiences of learners enrolled in online degrees offered by virtual-only institutions? Edward W. Taylor (2007) conducted a review of the literature on transformative learning theory and suggested “the most significant change found in this review was the greater attention given to the practice of fostering transformative learning in the higher education classroom or a workshop setting” (p. 181).

Even more significant to this study and the implications for further research, however, were his comments regarding the potential for transformative learning in the online setting:

Another medium that also involves a great deal of writing is the online setting (Cragg et al., 2001; Zieghan, 2001). Although these studies are only initial efforts with few significant findings, factors that seem to contribute to the transformative experience while online are the degree of life experience among the participants and the significance of having time to reflect on “written accounts of the intellectual and emotional connections” (Zieghan, 2001, p. 149) during asynchronous discussions. The greater life experience provides a “deeper well” from which to draw upon and react to discussions that emerged among online participants. (Taylor, 2007, pp. 182-183)

Findings from this study made a contribution to an area of inquiry that Taylor (2007) emphasized needs further research:

There is little understood about the impact of transformative learning on learner outcomes (p. 187). There is still much that is not known about transformative learning and much to learn about how people revise their interpretations about the world around them. (p. 189)

Additional research needs to be devoted to the development of competencies for distance education instructors (Egan & Akdere, 2005). In a study of distance education roles and competencies, Williams (2003) found that distance education leaders in higher education identified 30 competencies and thirteen roles that are needed to implement and manage distance education programs. The leader/change agents involved in the study indicated “interpersonal and communication skills remain necessary across all roles and dominated the top ten competencies” (Williams, 2003, p. 54).

In contrast, Egan and Akdere (2005) studied 133 graduate students from twelve program in the central United States featuring a specialization, minor, or degree program in distance education and found that the advanced distance education graduate student-practitioners involved in their study identified 21 key competencies and fourteen roles required for successful implementation of distance education and, significantly, placed “greater emphasis on competencies associated with the technical side of distance education than with the communication elements associated more with implementation” (Egan & Akdere, 2005, p. 100). According to Egan and Akdere (2005), the student practitioners in their study were heavily influenced by the formal training they were receiving, and the researchers concluded, “The findings suggest the need for greater

integration of situational, communication, management-related content and interaction-focused content in distance education curriculum” (Egan & Akdere, 2005, p. 100).

In another study conducted by Darabi et al. (2006), 148 distance instructors ranked seventeen tasks commonly performed by distance instructors in terms of importance, frequency of performance, and the time spent on each task. The researchers found that communication, discussion, interaction, and feedback ranked highest among the competencies. Young (2006) investigated student views of online instruction in higher education, and the responses of 199 undergraduates and graduate students enrolled in online classes indicated the most prominent characteristics of effective online teaching included:

1. adapting to student needs,
2. providing meaningful examples,
3. motivating students to do their best,
4. facilitating the course effectively,
5. delivering a valuable course,
6. communicating effectively, and
7. showing concern for student learning

(Young, 2006, p. 73).

In addition to clarification of roles and competencies required for the development and implementation of online education, there is also a need for guiding principles of instructional design and delivery in the online environment. Hirumi (2005)

provided the following evaluation of higher education's approach to guidelines, or benchmarks, for the development and delivery of online education:

World-class benchmarks not only define what should be done but also delineate how well it should be done. When specifying quality standards, you should consider whether you want to define minimum requirements or identify world-class benchmarks that people within your organization should strive to achieve. (p. 315)

Hirumi (2005) noted an area that is not well addressed by existing guidelines:

Feedback is vital to e-learning. . . . Feedback comes in two basic forms: confirmatory and corrective. Confirmatory feedback lets students know what they did correctly. Corrective feedback identifies areas and provides recommendations for improvement. Current guidelines recognize the importance of providing timely and appropriate feedback, but they do not detail the nature of the feedback. . . . To establish world-class standards, consider specifying the need to design and sequence e-learning interactions based on grounded instructional strategies. (pp. 317-318)

Ellis and Moore (2006) advocated benchmarking based on a quality model. They explained:

The quality model is an outcomes-based model; one that promotes and emphasizes the student in the evaluation of successful learning. In this sense, the starting point in the evaluation of the quality of the technology is whether or not students evaluate it as appropriate from their perspective. (p. 363)

Benchmarking quality in online learning is an area which needs further research. What benchmarks are encouraged, or expected, by institutions regarding the number of, and quality of, communications with students in an online course? To what extent do online instructors re-create their traditional lectures online rather than utilize the communication-rich environment to facilitate student interaction? To what extent does communication provided by an online instructor respect the challenges unique to women engaged in an online course of study?

In addition, there is a great need for research of the preparation and support of faculty who are asked to teach online courses. To what extent are full-time faculty utilized to teach online as compared to adjunct faculty? To what extent are institutions aware that “extensive use of part-time faculty has a negative effect on an important measure of quality: graduation rate” (Ruth, Sammons, & Poulin, 2007, p. 2)? Ruth et al. (2007) indicated “one multi-institution study concluded that for each 10% increase in part-time faculty, there is a 2.65% decrease in graduation rates” (p. 2).

To what degree is there clarification at institutions regarding the difference between the *development* of a quality online course and the *delivery* of a quality online course? Benson (2003) found multiple definitions of *quality* held by stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of an online program. According to Benson (2003):

The stakeholders . . . brought different, and often conflicting, definitions of quality to the process of planning and implementing online degree programs. . . . Although everyone on the project may want quality courses, the different

definitions that they hold of quality may result in unexpected influences on the online courses and degree programs. (p. 157)

To what extent are institutions encouraging online faculty to adopt a teaching philosophy focused on student learning rather than on teacher transmission of information? Askov, Johnston, Petty, and Young (2003) suggested professional development for online instructors that requires “educators to themselves be distant learners and experience firsthand what it is like to interact with an instructor and ‘classmates’ in a faceless environment” (p. 68). One of the author’s professional roles in distance education is to instruct an online course for faculty who plan to develop and teach online courses.

These prospective online faculty members have an opportunity to become online students prior to developing and delivering their own courses. Becoming an online student themselves allows the faculty to determine, many times, that their perception of what is required to develop and teach a quality online course is not consistent with the complexities of integrating online communications, instructional design for the Web environment, accessibility considerations, copyright law, library support systems for distant students, and the actual development of a course, which is much like constructing a publication. How many institutions have similar professional development and support structures for faculty who they select to teach in the online environment?

There is also a need for research to determine how well institutions are utilizing online programs to serve the growing number of potential students in higher education. Texas, for example, “is not on track to meet the participation goal of the state’s *Closing*

the Gaps by 2015 higher education plan” (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2006b, p. 3). The plan calls for Texas institutions of higher education to increase the overall participation rate in higher education from 5.0% in 2000 to 5.7% in 2015, to accommodate 630,000 more students (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2007).

Further research is needed to determine why there is no central repository for information regarding online Ph.D. programs in higher education. Telephone calls to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, to each of the accrediting agencies in the United States, and to the Southern Regional Educational Board revealed that information regarding online Ph.D. programs, the lack of which information was mentioned several times by participants in this study, is not available. Women, in particular, who balance employment as well as domestic and other community responsibilities are in need of easy access to information about available online degree offerings. More information is needed to determine how women might locate online degree programs offered by accredited, public institutions, particularly at the doctoral level.

There is a need for research to determine ways in which women who have earned an online degree may serve as a resource and encouragement for women who are seeking information and encouragement about online learning. Role models, especially among women, have a powerful influence on the career choice and self-efficacy of other women. Quimby and DeSantis (2006) investigated self-efficacy and role model influence as predictors of career choice among 368 female undergraduates. Multiple regression analyses indicated that self-efficacy and role model influence accounted for

significant variance in career choice. The researchers advocated use of the Internet to provide mentor role models to women:

Role models have a small but significant influence on career choice over and above self-efficacy. . . . Career counselors could . . . use the Internet as another way to connect women to inspirational career role models. For example, a database could be created to include successful women who volunteer to correspond with female students about their career-related concerns and aspirations. (Quimby & DeSantis, 2006, p. 304)

This influence could be especially true for minority women who enter graduate school in disproportionately smaller numbers and who may benefit from ethnic matching of mentors (Ulloa & Herrera, 2006). Ulloa and Herrera (2006) explained, “Underrepresented undergraduates sometimes lack the exposure to, and accurate knowledge about, graduate school. As a consequence, few are aware of the opportunities that exist for graduate school” (p. 361). Furthermore, Ulloa and Herrera (2006) added, “Ethnic minorities often find that they feel isolated from their academic communities of practice” (p. 362).

The women who participated in this doctoral dissertation study emphasized during their interviews, and in emails exchanged during the year following the interview, their willingness to share information about online learning if a mechanism for providing assistance were coordinated and developed. Certainly, such a means for providing mentoring, support, and information sharing would require oversight and careful

consideration, but it could be a unique and valuable resource to women who have been away from the educational setting and are tentative about seeking an online degree.

Research is needed, as well, to determine the extent to which institutions of higher education are addressing students' fear of, and general lack of knowledge about, technologies used by the institution. How well are institutions utilizing systematic methods of instruction which allow tracking of student success? Women in this study mentioned a "bridge person" who they could contact with any question about the program. Others mentioned a "program advisor." Generally, there was an emphasis on having an individual they could contact with questions. Research is needed to determine the extent to which institutions are providing this kind of support for students in an online degree program, and whether the presence or absence of such a person affects student success or failure.

Finally, research is needed to better understand the extent to which survivors of violence, women who were formerly in a traumatic and abusive situation, are struggling in the online learning environment. Wagner and Magnusson (2005) posited that this issue is significant, yet largely unacknowledged by higher education:

Women's status as survivors has virtually not been problematized as an issue within our system of higher education (p. 450). In the case of survivors of violence, . . . once they identify themselves as having been victimized, the victim label often comes to overshadow all other facets of their identity, obscuring their complex social identities (p. 450). All women appear to share at least one thing in common - the ramifications of violence are felt for years, if not their entire

lifetime (p. 452). Universities could help by acknowledging the fact that women are victimized at an alarming rate, thereby normalizing the experiences of these women. It is critical to remember that experiences of violence cross all boundaries and affect women of all classes, races and other social locations (p. 459). In every classroom there will likely be a significant percentage of women who have experienced trauma. Although they may enact a variety of coping strategies in order to both cope and maintain the secrecy of their identities as survivors, the associated costs are great. The emotional and physical toll of such heroic efforts may be expected to have lasting effects on these women. (p. 459)

In this study of eighteen women, Diana was the survivor of physical violence. While I interviewed her, she withheld the information until I asked why she was so committed to helping women in shelters. At that point, her experience spilled out, and I realized how her past trauma shaped her thoughts and actions even today. How does higher education cope with students who have undergone violence?

Research is needed to study the potential for transformational outcomes unique among these women. As Dirkx (2006) suggested, there are times when evidence-based research methods and technical-rationality fail to address the “particular context, demands, uncertainties, complexities, and ambiguities” (p. 284) of a situation. Rather, Dirkx (2006) advocated “a reflective, narrative insider approach . . . to generating deeper understanding of practice” (p. 286) wherein “researchers create opportunities . . . to perceive and address problems in a situated and contextual manner” (p. 286) to “bring about learning and change, whether in individual understandings and behaviors or

institutional and social policies” (p. 287). The incidence of trauma survivors may be even more prevalent among women in the online environment who may gain access to higher education via the Internet in a subversive manner to gain credentials necessary to change their position in life and to work within a context of violence within their lives. “How might we address this important reality of women’s lives, knowing that adequate supports may not be readily available to those who subsequently find themselves deeply affected?” (Wagner & Magnusson, 2005, p. 453).

The potential research topics mentioned here are among innumerable topics related to research of women in online education. As Kramarae (2001) indicated, “many of the most critical issues for women in online education are only now being recognized” (p. 6). As interest in distance education and the numbers of women in online education continue to grow, research will, hopefully, proliferate and provide the framework needed to shape theories regarding the outcomes of women who earn an online degree.

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