A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF WHAT MOTIVATES SECONDARY STUDENTS TO ENROLL IN VIRTUAL ACADEMIES

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to determine what motivates secondary students to enroll in virtual academies. Students at the Tennessee Virtual Academy (TeViA) were contacted via email to determine participation interest in this study. Students that chose to participate from TeViA were asked to complete a reflective journal and participate in a semi-structured interview at their residence. In vivo coding and initial coding were conducted on the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. In vivo coding was also conducted on observation notes before theming of the data. The theory guiding this study was Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory directed by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Identifying motivating factors of secondary students that enroll in virtual academies directly relate to the Self-Determination Theory in that social and environmental factors contribute to one's intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Results of the data analysis point to that more than one factor, intrinsic or extrinsic, motivated the majority of secondary students to enroll in virtual academies with parents being a large influence. The research utilized van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological research theory in defining unique themes in determining what motivates secondary students to enroll in a virtual academy. After theming the data, five unique themes evolved from this study with a large amount of wasted time in a brick-and-mortar school converging as the most noted theme that motivated secondary students to enroll in a virtual academy.

Keywords: extrinsic motivation, hermeneutical phenomenological study, intrinsic motivation, online programs, secondary students, virtual academies

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I want to thank my Heavenly Father for the many lessons learned during this process. The lesson that made the most impact is that everything is in God's perfect timing, not mine. I also want to thank Dr. Booth, Dr. Swezey, and Dr. Robinson for the spiritual support and continual guidance through this process. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Dennis, and our children for their loving support and encouragement during this journey.

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List of Abbreviations

Administrative Placement Academy (APA)

Annual Yearly Progress (AYP)

Center for the Application of Information Technologies (CAIT)

Career and Technical Education (CTE)

Education Management Organization (EMO)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Large Unit District Association (LUDA)

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA)

Tennessee Virtual Academy (TeViA)

Virtual High School (VHS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Modern technology and rapid changes in society have led to adjustments in pedagogy, curriculum, and education options (Davis & Roblyer, 2005; El-Mowafy, Kuhn, & Snow, 2013; Gubb, Pate & Leech, 2009). Public school administrators must be concerned with funding, maximizing the educational experiences, and maintaining or improving graduation rates. With these concerns at the forefront, some public school districts have added virtual schools to the district framework. "The vision that drove the first virtual schools was that of more affordable, consistent, and equitable access to high-quality educational opportunities for students who need them most: rural, underserved, and at-risk" (Davis & Roblyer, 2005, p. 400).

Before administrators can make an appropriate decision on adding a virtual program to a district, it is important to have information regarding students that enroll in virtual academies. Subsequently, the majority of current literature related to virtual academies focuses on virtual curriculum, pedagogy, advantages, and disadvantages. This hermeneutical phenomenological study addressed what motivates a student to enroll in a public virtual academy. In attempt to determine the factors which motivate a student to enroll in a public virtual academy, literature related to Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory of motivation and the intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors for the student were reviewed.

Background

Use of technology in the classroom is an essential element to an effective learning environment. In the information age, students of all ages prefer to use technology for learning (Kachel et al., 2005). Subsequently, the National Education Technology Plan was introduced by the United States Department of Education in 2010. The plan builds on utilizing technology to

engage students in learning, to improve student learning, to compile data for improving education, and to implement processes that result in higher levels of productivity and efficiency ("Introduction," 2010). A result of increased dependency upon technology in public education is the implementation of virtual programs. Individual virtual courses are now being offered in public high schools to provide as supplementary and advanced courses outside of the regularly offered curriculum, (Anonymous, 2010a); as a means to complete course requirements (Patterson, 2001); to recover a credit for graduation; as a course when the student's schedule is not accommodating (Wood, 2005); or as a requirement for graduation (Standard diploma credit accommodations, 2017). As well as providing options for public education institutions, virtual programs furnish alternatives to students that may have religious preferences, safety concerns, flexible schedule needs, and medical issues resulting in homebound instruction (Calvert, 2009; Hawley, 2003). Utilizing technology in the classroom environment allows for a variety of communication methods. Learning management systems (LMS) not only provide assignment management but establish a means of communicating with many at one time. Additionally, email and other forms of social media may be used for communicating. This generation of current secondary students have grown up in a culture where computers are used to creatively "communicate and to seek access and process information for educational and recreational purposes" (Nichols & Ng, 2009, p. 323). Continuous communication between students and teacher promotes a true learning environment (Kachel, 2005). A vast amount of research has been conducted on various aspects of distance education. This research includes advantages for students and teachers, creation of virtual curriculum, the successful virtual learning environments and various virtual programs across the country (Donlevy, 2003; Haynes, 2002; McAllister & Watkins, 2012; Picoli, Ahmad, & Elves, 2001; Tunison & Sackney, 2004). Even though this

research is crucial to public school districts, certain aspects concerning virtual schools have been ignored in previous research, including the determination of how virtual school requirements correlate to the overall structure of the district, the student's situation, point-of-view, and motivating factors. This hermeneutical phenomenological study aimed to address these issues, therefore adding pertinent information to determine if a virtual program is feasible for a specific student or an entire school district.

The results of this hermeneutical phenomenological research not only provided additional knowledge to school administrators, but individual students as well. The benefit of this research is an understanding of the motivating factors for a student to enroll in a virtual academy. With this additional piece of information, administrators will have more data than just the identified pros and cons. Students considering enrolling in a public virtual academy can reference the expected data results to find similar situations of other students and determine if a virtual academy is a feasible alternative for high school graduation.

Current literature indicates many students that participate in virtual programs are goal-oriented, self-disciplined, and highly motived (Diemer, 2007; Kirby, Sharpe, Bourgeois, & Greene, 2010; Matuga, 2009). These attributes characterize Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory of motivation identify three psychological needs which correlate to the student attributes identified in the current literature: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013; Szalma, 2014). By examining individual student situations in relation to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory of motivation, specific motivating factors to enroll in public virtual academies were identified.

Situation to Self

My interest in this topic was sparked from the fact my oldest daughter, when in high school, requested to complete her high school courses via a virtual academy. However, this was not a viable option at the time. Also, a local school district had recently implemented a publicly funded statewide virtual high school. The use of virtual courses has made its way into the traditional classrooms for a variety of reasons. Virtual courses are utilized to create individualized educational program for each student in alternative programs such as the APA (Administrative Placement Academy) in the school in which I am currently employed. This school also offers 45 virtual courses through Virtual Virginia and Elite Learning (Virginia High School Program Planning Book, 2017). I am personally acquainted with the successes of online education, having received my Masters of Arts in Education from University of Phoenix and an Education Specialist degree in Education Leadership from Liberty University via online programs. This provides authenticity, as virtual programs in post-secondary education are not only an option, but a highly successful route for degree completion. Since beginning the necessary research to answer the research questions, the school district in which I work began a taskforce, of which I am a part, to research and implement offerings of specialized virtual courses created by our teachers. This is the first step to creating a public virtual academy in our school district. However, the question still remains as to what motivates high school students to forgo the traditional high school classroom for a virtual education.

I adopted an ontological philosophical assumption in researching the motivating factors of secondary students that choose to enroll in virtual academies. According to Creswell (2007), an ontological assumption acknowledges each individual participant in the study has an individual perspective and view of reality. I believe each student's experience directs the

perspective of reality and direction in choosing to enroll in a virtual academy. Along with an ontological philosophical assumption, I adopted the social constructivism paradigm for this study. In completing the research, I expected to find how each student's experience will influence the motivating factors leading to enrollment in virtual academies.

Problem Statement

As social, political, and economic factors contribute to educational changes, it is important for all possible solutions and teaching methods to be addressed in order to improve graduation rates, which is a measure of student success and school effectiveness (Miao & Haney, 2004). With continual increases in dropout rates (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010), virtual courses may be an acceptable alternative for some at-risk students. Improvements in and accessibility to technology make virtual courses an option in education. With the continual improvements in technology as well as the ease of accessibility to the internet, virtual courses are valid options for educational choices. Donlevy (2003) states that interest in virtual education programs continues to increase as more benefits are recognized. Virtual high schools have gained popularity as 19 states have officially recognized programs and one-fourth of public schools have some type of distance learning program (Mupinga, 2005). Advantages recognized from virtual programs include enhanced curriculum offerings, schedule flexibility, expert accessibility, and gained technology skills (Donlevy, 2003). Virtual courses to a certain degree, allow students to personalize the learning experience according to their needs, interests, and learning styles (Livingston & Condie, 2006). Therefore, the options provided through virtual curriculum supply educators with additional approaches to teaching and students to learning.

Even though numerous benefits of virtual programs have been identified, research indicates virtual courses are not appropriate for students who are unmotivated, unable to work

independently, prone to procrastinate, or lack parental guidance (Molnar, 2013; Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009). The necessary skills and attitudes for a student to be successful in a virtual academy is "sufficiently different from those of classroom-based students to warrant research interest" (Bernard, Brauer, Abrami, & Surkes, 2004, p. 32). Therefore, the problem is identifying motivating factors for students at the secondary level (ninth through twelfth grades) of enrolling in virtual academies.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to determine motivation for or experiences of secondary students who chose to enroll in virtual academies as a means of completing high school. For this research, virtual academies have been generally defined as an educational platform with a state-approved curriculum, a faculty, and an administrator providing comprehensive learning outside of the classroom where students have access to web-based resources and all involved can communicate via technological means (Bernard et al., 2004; Tunison & Sackney, 2004). The theory which guided this study was Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory as it relates to the specific motivations of students choosing to attend a virtual academy.

Significance of Study

The significance of this study was to determine why a secondary student would choose completing high school through a virtual academy as opposed to face-to-face instruction in a traditional classroom. The primary goal of education should be providing students with fundamental skills that encourage further learning in order to be productive, good citizens who can problem solve using critical thinking, and reasoning skills. As the world and culture continue changing, virtual programs are being utilized as a learning tool by providing

alternatives to the traditional classroom setting (Patterson, 2001). "Successful alternative educational programs have indicated that students benefit from atypical instructional delivery systems…" (White, Lare, Mueller, Smeaton, & Waters, 2007, p. 14). Virtual courses are being utilized to increase curriculum selections in my local public school district. Virtual academies and online courses available to secondary students are expected to continue increasing due to the rise of accessibility to computers (Wilson, 2004).

Additionally, virtual academies require instructional and assessment techniques that are not considered traditional. High school students who participated in courses or completed all secondary classes virtually are more likely to attend college and tend to perform better academically during the first year (Kirby, Sharpe, Bourgeois, & Greene, 2010). The other end of the spectrum, which warrants investigation when considering the benefits of virtual programs is the number of ailing virtual academies. Out of Pennsylvania's 11 virtual academies in 2010, seven did not make Annual Yearly Progress (Anonymous, 2010c). The reason for not meeting AYP was due to the graduation rate being below the state's required threshold. Thus, it is important for administrators in the education system to have a better understanding as to why students will take advantage of the virtual class option. Results of this study are important to school districts considering adding a virtual academy option in the district; and to secondary students and their parents contemplating whether a virtual academy is a viable option to obtain a high school diploma.

Research Questions

According to Creswell (2007), research questions for qualitative studies should be divided into one central question and a small number of sub-questions. For this hermeneutical phenomenological study, one central question and four sub-questions were identified for

investigating the experiences of secondary students that choose to enroll in and complete high school through a virtual academy.

Central Question

What are the motivating factors of secondary students for enrolling in a virtual academy? According to Meyers (2010), "[A] motivation is a need or desire that energizes behavior and directs it toward a goal" (p. 443). Identifying students' needs and desires provides critical data as to why they choose virtual academies as an educational avenue even with prevalent criticism of virtual education. Isolation, time commitment, technical difficulties, and necessary self-management skills are some of the criticisms of virtual education (Bernard et al., 2004; Boulton, 2008; Donlevy, 2003; Kirby et al., 2010). With the criticism of virtual education, answers to this research question provided insight into the possibility that virtual academies are considered a viable educational option.

Sub-questions

The first sub-question was: How do students believe virtual classes will aid in obtaining the goal of graduating from high school? Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are the factors of Self-Determination Theory. "Extrinsic motivation is a construct that pertains whenever an activity is done in order to attain some separable outcome" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). The goal of graduating high school can be considered as the extrinsic motivating factor.

The second sub-question was: What is the perception of secondary students on how guidance counselors influence their decision to enroll in a virtual academy? Academic advisor, or guidance counselors, are knowledgeable of "academic programs and curricula requirements" (Feghali, Zbib, & Hallal, 2011, p. 83) and are expected to provide academic guidance. How this guidance is perceived by the student could contribute to the student's motivating factors.

The third and final sub-question was: What do the students see as the gained advantages and disadvantages experienced related to the choice of enrolling in a virtual academy? To reach a high level of intrinsic motivation, satisfaction must be experienced (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Satisfaction and challenges guide an individual's intrinsic motivation (Myers, 2010). Therefore, by identifying a student's experiences as advantages and disadvantages can help in understanding the motivating factors for students to enroll in a virtual academy.

Definitions

To understand better the various aspects of virtual education, a few important terms have been defined. These terms are virtual learning, discussion groups, blended learning, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning, motivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation.

1. *Virtual learning* – Virtual learning environment (or virtual schools are defined as computer-based environments that provide students various resources for learning and interacting (Piccoli, Ahmed, & Ives, 2001).
2. *Discussion groups* – Discussion groups or forums "provide the ability for asynchronous discussion to occur over a period of time" (Anonymous, 2009, p. 2).
3. *Blended learning* – Blended learning "combines traditional classroom learning with online … learning in order to maximize the understanding of theoretical principles, gaining knowledge and development of technical, practical, and professional skills" (El-Mowafy, et al., 2013, p. 146).
4. *Synchronous learning* – Synchronous learning is real-time interactions via technology of participants not in the same physical location (Antunes, 208).
5. *Asynchronous learning* – Asynchronous learning provides an opportunity for students to participate at various times and not all at the same time (Hrastinski, 2008).

6. *Motivation* – "Motivation is an umbrella concept that involves psychological forces giving energy for different actions" (Pâceşilâ, 2014, p. 7).
7. *Intrinsic motivation* – Engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction and personal pleasure (Al-Dhamit & Kreishan, 2016, Ryan & Deci, 2000).
8. *Extrinsic motivation* – Engaging in an activity to obtain a separate consequence (Al-Dhamit & Kreishan, 2016, Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Summary

Over the years, quality education has evolved to include technology. The inclusion of technology offers new strategies to assist students in graduating from high school. "No longer is a classroom confined within the four walls of a brick-and-mortar school building" (Diener, 2007, para. 2). Virtual learning provides educational institutions new avenues to reach students and offer additional educational opportunities. Completely answering the research question of "What are the motivating factors of secondary students for enrolling in a virtual academy?" was imperative in providing insight for educational leaders when making decisions regarding virtual education programs.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Overview

The introduction of "electronic technologies into traditional courses helped make distant education courses possible…" (Hamblin, 2010, p. 361); in addition, it was a stepping stone to the virtual school option. Much has been written on the design of virtual schools, including topics such as what may be considered advantages and disadvantages to virtual schools, student experiences within a virtual classroom, and if virtual schools provide the same quality of education as the traditional brick-and-mortar school. Little has been written as to what motivates secondary students to attend public virtual school in the first place. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, literature was reviewed pertaining to the Self-Determination Theory of motivation for students and facts related to virtual schools.

Theoretical Framework

For this hermeneutical phenomenological study, a social constructivist paradigm was used. The goal with research using the social constructivist paradigm "is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation" (Creswell, 2007, p. 20). One aspect of a constructivist paradigm is focusing on real life applications. As noted by van Manen (1990), hermeneutics refers to the interpretations of a person's lived experiences, while phenomenology relates to the participant's orientation to the lived experience. He also indicated that hermeneutic phenomenology is thought of as a human science that attempts to explain the meaning of the human experiences and understand the environment in which the experience transpires. Thus, following a social constructivist paradigm was a natural approach in this hermeneutical phenomenological study.

Within the social constructivist paradigm, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, as well as Ryan's and Deci Self-Determination Theory of motivation, were reviewed in determining the motivating factors of secondary students completing high school in a public virtual academy. Bandura "believed that human factors are the result of dynamic connections among personal factors, such as cognition, environmental factors, and behavior" (Owens & Valesky, 2011, p. 296). Thus interviewing each participant in the individual's natural surroundings provided necessary information to aid in the connection of the participant's personal factors and environmental factors.

Bandura, in his Social Cognitive Theory, viewed people as self-motivating (Owens & Valesky, 2011), thus this study makes a connection to Ryan's and Deci motivational theory called Self-Determination Theory and what leads the student to make the decision of attending a public virtual academy. "Learning online requires more self-regulation intrinsic motivation…" (Gormley, Colella, & Shell, 2012, p. 177). Intrinsic motivation defines the cognitive perspective on motivation (Owens & Valesky, 2011) and the underlying premise for the Self-Determination Theory (Guiffrida, Lynch, Wall, & Abel, 2013). By combining Bandura's Cognitive Theory with Ryan's and Deci Self-Determination Theory of motivation, a theoretical framework for this hermeneutic phenomenological study produced themes which explored the factors that influenced secondary students to attend public virtual academies.

Related Literature

Adolescence and Motivation

The age range of high school students is approximately 14 to 18 years of age. By most theorists, this age group is considered "adolescent" or "late-adolescent." Jean Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development theory indicates children begin to enter this formal operation stage at

approximately 11 or 12 years of age when students begin to utilize hypothetical thinking and deductive reasoning. Some students do not enter this stage until 16.5 years of age (Booth, 1983). During this formal operation stage, adolescents begin to demonstrate traits of organization in the immediate environment (Booth, 1983), understand the importance of academics, and demonstrate self-involvement (Spano, 2004). Depending on the student's place in the cognitive development spectrum, environmental influences such as technology support, personal, and institutional culture, and staff development contribute to the effectiveness of the virtual learning environment (Liu, Hodgson, & Lord, 2010). As adolescents continue to progress through developmental stages, choices are more closely related to the individual goals, thus creating a link between behavior and motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002). Motivation is viewed as a goal-directed behavior (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Szalma, 2014). Motivation is often influenced by a myriad of factors: "Thus the development of motivation is a complex interaction of change within the individual child and change in the environments they encounter" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002, p. 3). During this transition period for adolescent cognitive development, students encounter numerous motivating factors. The desire to obtain a specific goal or outcome is not immune to academia. An adolescent's motivation and behavior result in academic outcomes including "the use of differing cognitive processing strategies, different effects on learning, and differing approaches to academic tasks" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002, p. 207). Thus, an adolescent's current position on the spectrum of cognitive development influences motivating factors for enrolling in a public virtual academy.

Through the years, many motivational theories have been posed. "Most theories of motivation … [are viewed] as a unitary phenomenon, one that varies from very little motivation … to a great deal" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54). Some of the motivation theories that can help

determine the underlining factors for adolescent decisions are Abraham Maslow's Human Motivation Theory or Hierarchy of Needs, McClelland's Three Needs Theory, and Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory. According to Maslow's Human Motivation Theory, "people have different needs that should be placed in a certain order" (Pâceşilâ, 2014, p. 8). Maslow identified five levels of needs. The premise of Maslow's Human Motivation Theory is that each need can only be satisfied in succession. These needs, identified in order, are esteem; belongingness and love; safety; biological and psychological; and self-actualization or the being need (Pâceşilâ, 2014). Only when a person reaches the self-actualization level can the desire to attain a goal and attempt a new skill become feasible (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007). The current stage of an adolescent's cognitive development, as well as achieving self-actualization, can affect the establishment of goals and the perceived factors that influence decisions.

Another motivation theory is Vroom's Expectancy Theory. This theory is a cognitive theory based on the concept that a person makes choices that will result in the greatest benefit (Pâceşilâ, 2014). Vroom's Expectancy Theory parallels cognitive development stages in the fact that when adolescents reach a higher level of cognitive development, an evaluation of choices is made to achieve the greatest satisfaction.

A couple of other motivational theories to be considered are Herzberg's Hygiene/ Motivation Theory and McClelland's Three Needs Theory. Both theories are associated with a person's need for achievement. Herzberg associates hygiene needs as extrinsic factors in the situation that must be satisfied or the person will not be motivated (Pâceşilâ, 2014). In regards to McClelland's Three Needs Theory, "the need for achievement is the most powerful motivating factor, people showing a strong desire for success, but also a great fear of failure" (Pâceşilâ,

2014, p. 10). Thus for both theories, the desire to succeed, or not to fail, is the underlying premise.

Self-determination learning and motivation have been associated with being successful in education, therefore examining Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory was essential. The Self-Determination Theory proposes "that humans have innate needs for self-determination (or autonomy), competence, and relatedness" (Wigfield & Eccles, 2002, p. 155). The effect social and environmental factors have on an individual's intrinsic motivation is an important aspect of the Self-Determination Theory.

> Self-Determination Theory considers that motivation falls along a continuum, with more external forms of motivation at one end and more internal forms of motivation at the other, and that need-satisfying experiences can help to shift motivation from the external to the internal end of the continuum. (Guiffrida, et al., 2013, p. 122)

Just as an individual's environment is a crucial element of a hermeneutical phenomenological study, an individual's environment is considered to be a significant factor in the Self-Determination Motivation Theory. "A motivational structure is a set of structures in the environment that offers opportunities for the experience of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Szalma, 2014, p. 1461). In the quest to determine what motivates high school students to attend a public online academic, the Self-Determination Theory and the relationship of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors were examined.

Intrinsic motivation is simple defined as completing an action just for the inherent satisfaction (Pâceşilâ, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Szalma, 2014). A few factors that can be considered intrinsic are achievement, recognition, enjoyment, and pride (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007; Myers, 2010; Pâceşilâ, 2014). Motivation which stems from a student's internal desire for

success is ideal for student development: “Intrinsically motivated behaviors, which are performed out of interest and satisfy the innate psychological needs for competence and autonomy are the prototype of self-determined behavior” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 65). An individual’s situation contributes to the factors that cause intrinsic motivation to satisfy basic psychological needs for personal autonomy of a goal (Pâceşilâ, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Szalma, 2014). Intrinsic motivation “is a critical element in cognitive, social, and physical development because it is through acting on one’s inherent interests that one grows in knowledge and skills” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). A relationship between Self-Determination Motivation Theory and the latter stages of adolescent cognitive development can be made via intrinsic motivation.

Extrinsic motivation cannot be ignored when examining the Self-Determination Theory of motivation. “Extrinsically motivated behaviors … can vary in the extent to which they represent self-determination” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 65). Extrinsic motivation is simply the desire to obtain a reward separate from the specific activity or avoid a possible punishment (Myers, 2010; Szalma, 2014). Therefore, extrinsic motivating factors have a significant effect on intrinsic motivating factors, especially when exploring the aspects which influence a student’s decision to attend a public virtual academy.

Hence, adolescent success in the virtual learning environment does not depend solely on student’s cognitive development. Environmental factors that influence students’ learning behaviors play an important role in being successful (Lui et al., 2010). A student’s culture and environmental influences guide whether the student is a self-advocate for learning, goal oriented, and purposeful. To understand completely how a public virtual academy is even an option for an

adolescent, a review of how virtual learning was essential. The development of the history for virtual academies provides insight or a basis for adolescents' motivating factors.

Virtual Learning Background

The use of technology in traditional classrooms is encouraged in most curriculums. A relationship of technology and education has resulted in students participating in more virtual classes. Today's adolescent students are comfortable using technology for a variety of means. Thus, many of the students participating in virtual programs chose this education option (Black, Ferdig, & DiPietro, 2008). The data which details the popularity of online programs is hard to ignore: "Online learning is one of the fastest growing areas in education … [with] 4,000,000 students … enrolled in the online learning in the U.S." (Anonymous, 2011b, p. 58). The escalation of virtual programs can be contributed to the increased efforts for American students to be competitive in the quickly changing global economy and informational needs (Grubbs et al., 2009). Along with striving to remain competitive in global education, students that are homeschooled, chronically ill, at-risk, attendance problems, having family obligations, or living in rural communities are targeted by virtual learning programs by offering a wide variety of curricula and additional means of communication to students in a similar situation (Berman & Tinker, 1997; Csiernik, Furze, Dromgole, Rischynski, 2006; Mupinga, 2005). Many of these virtual programs may require tuition or are offered through private institutions.

Virtual learning in the elementary and secondary classroom can be traced back to 1996 when two school districts —the Concord Consortium in Concord, Massachusetts and Hudson Public Schools in Hudson, Massachusetts—collaborated to create the Virtual High School Project (Wood, 2005). This new trend did not take long to catch on. The second virtual school in the United States was established in 1997 (Reid et al., 2009). By the 2005-2006 school year,

700,000 students were enrolled in virtual schools (Tucker, 2007) and 23 states established virtual schools by 2007 (Zandberg & Lewis, 2008). Many students only participate in virtual courses, not virtual, full-time academies. These courses are offered through 2,400 publicly funded charter, state, and district virtual schools, as well as community colleges and universities (Pape, 2005). Along with virtual courses and virtual programs, blended learning programs have been constructed. The blended learning programs "combine traditional classroom learning with online … learning in order to maximize the understanding of theoretical principles, gaining knowledge and development of technical, practical and professional skills" (El-Mowafy et al., 2013, p. 146).

A virtual curriculum is not always created and offered via local school districts. One of the nation's top providers for virtual curriculum is K12 Incorporated [K12 Inc.], which provides virtual curriculum to 26 states as of 2009 (Anonymous, 2010b). William Bennett, the former U.S. Secretary of Education, is the founder of K12 Inc. (Harbron, 2006). According to the U. S. Department of Education's National Education Technology Plan released in 2008, approximately 25% of K-12 public schools were offering virtual instruction (Wood, 2005). The use of technology in the classroom improves the opportunities for students due to the time flexibility in attending the class by the creation of synchronous and asynchronous learning environments (Vrasidas, 2003). Virtual learning is currently available in a variety of formats ranging from a "stand a-lone distance learning with little or no face-to-face contact with a teacher, to materials and activities that are designed to complement and supplement more traditional teaching methods" (Livingston & Condie, 2006, p. 152). Thus, online learning in public education is not confined to virtual schools. The variety of virtual programs offered to public school students "range from text-based correspondence programs to online programs that fully use technology-mediated instruction" (Nicholas & Ng, 2009, p. 306). It is also important for a school system to

provide an adequate education in order for students to matriculate into post-secondary education. K12 Inc. determined that students graduating from virtual schools are accepted into higher education institutions, including top ranked colleges and universities (Anonymous, 2010b). Therefore, virtual instruction offers secondary administrators options to provide the students for receiving necessary courses leading to graduation, college preparedness, and interest-related courses not offered in the district.

As the number of virtual programs increased, classroom and teaching strategies had to change. Teaching in a virtual environment requires different strategies than those of traditional face-to-face instruction. The variations in teaching may influence the motivating factors for adolescents choosing to attend a public virtual academy.

Virtual Teaching Strategies and Pedagogy

Lesson delivery for the virtual environment, as well as traditional assessment practices, must be evaluated (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010). Effective teachers in the traditional classroom use non-verbal cues from students to determine if understanding or confusion is transpiring. Without face-to-face interaction and observing the student non-verbal clues, maintaining an appropriate course pace can be difficult for distance teachers (Conn & Rue, 2011). Whether in a traditional or virtual classroom, instruction must still focus on appropriate materials, varying learning strategies, and incentives that will encourage student learning (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2006). Therefore, the focus of the virtual classroom is to be "an interactive student-centered learning environment" (Marrotte-Newman, 2009, p. 34) as opposed to the traditional read-lecture instructional model (Grubbs et al., 2009; Hawley, 2003).

The student-teacher relationship is of high importance in virtual education. As with face-to-face instruction, when the teacher has a better understanding of the student, the learning

potential can be maximized by tailoring curriculum and delivery methods to the student's specific needs (Black et al., 2008). A lack of trust between instructor and student in the virtual learning environment may impede the amount of learning (Conn & Rue, 2011). An important component of a virtual classroom is the interaction which requires trust as well as course pedagogy. Interaction can be achieved through discussion boards, chat rooms, forums, and collaborative assignments (Grubbs et al., 2009; Kachel et al., 2005). The interactive virtual learning environment requires everyone to contribute to the course encouraging critical thinking from the students (Hawley, 2003; Lim & Kim, 2002-2003). An interactive, student-centered learning environment consequently creates opportunities for students to reflect on what was learned and create self-assessment strategies (Beebe et al., 2010; Livingston & Condie, 2006). Teachers in the virtual arena must now expand their job description to include counselor, assistant, and designer (Klein & Poplin, 2008).

The effectiveness of any virtual school "depends directly on the involvement of a committed teacher" (Patterson, 2001, p. 34). Between 1985 and 1995, "student involvement was believed the best alternative pedagogical practice for helping students embrace sociology" (Hamlin, 2010, p. 358). This theory has not changed in the desire for a student to reach higher order thinking and problem solving. Livingston & Condie (2006) suggest that the use of technology provides opportunities for students to become actively engaged in the learning process and further develop critical thinking skills. Interactive learning via means of the computer in a virtual academy contributes to the learning experience by promoting problem solving (Wilson, 2004). The course's dependency upon technology determines the teaching strategy. Effective virtual learning environments are the result of teachers who focus on curriculum, activities, standards, and the media (Miller, Veletsianos, & Doering, 2008).

Technology can be utilized for a variety of functions, such as offering additional resources in a blackboard that contains all materials for an entire course. Utilizing a discussion board in the virtual class as the primary instructional feature can encourage promotion of interaction between the students and teacher (Matuga, 2009). Discussion boards allow for a constant form of communication in the virtual learning environment. "Learning is communication, and nothing appears to be more important in learning online than consistent and ongoing communication" (Kachel et al., 2005, p. 14). Class and group discussion via forums contribute to increasing student understanding of virtual material (Jones, 2003). The interaction between teacher-student and student-student within the virtual environment improves the overall learning experience (Bernard et al., 2004; Pituch & Lee, 2006).

Synchronous, asynchronous, and "quasi-synchronous" learning tools are technologies available for delivery of virtual course materials (Jones, 2003). The quality of the virtual learning environment along with the technology preparedness show significant correlation to effective learning behavior (Ho, 2009). For a virtual learning environment to be effective, curriculum must be based on the learning activities that are relevant to the student, requiring interactivity and authentic problem-solving skills (Delgado-Garcia & Cuello, 2010; Lim, 2005). Involvement in a virtual academy is unique due to the close online community only accessible by students, teachers, and parents (Dando, 2005). Interactivity among teachers, students, and parents happen through emails, online discussions which allow for intellectual exchanges between classmates and the instructor, and real-time online tutoring sessions (Diener, 2007).

In some cases, virtual learning is termed "e-learning" which refers to the use of digital resources in and out of the classroom that promote personal learning experiences through the sharing of information (Livingston & Condie, 2006). Collaboration is also a major component of

virtual instruction. Group activities, asynchronous online discussions, and discovery are possible teaching strategies for successful virtual instruction (Antunes, 2008; Lim & Kim, 2002-2003; Nicholas & Ng, 2009). Antunes (2008) presents information on how to develop collaborative activities for secondary students learning in the virtual environment. Incorporating collaborative work in virtual learning promotes the development of critical thinking skills (Tunison & Sackney, 2004). Antunes writes, "Group activities can be proposed to develop collaborative learning and students' autonomy" (p. 748). Through instruction, teachers encourage socialization by asynchronous discussions in which students "project their own presence and [have] opportunities to digest their peers' contributions as well as to write their responses and reflect on them before posting" (Nicholas & Ng, 2009, p. 308). Interaction with the teacher is the main component for a successful virtual academy (Patterson, 2001). The interaction and collaboration opportunities among students and peers are considered a characteristic of a successful virtual learning environment (Miller et al., 2008).

Another important component of a successful virtual class is preparation (Jones, 2003). Having the complete course content and assignments before the start date promotes smooth course progression. Preparation for a virtual lesson must still contain the same sound principles as a lesson designed for a traditional classroom. Teacher organization is also an important requirement for an effective virtual learning environment (Conn & Rue, 2011). An effective lesson should engage learners, provide immediate feedback, present material at an appropriate level for the learner, and allow time for practice (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005). Teachers become facilitators in a virtual classroom. A facilitator's main role is to provide individual instruction and tutoring where needed (Harbron, 2006). Regularly accessing emails, reviewing discussion board forums, posting reminders of assignments due, and participation in the virtual

classroom are important factors for the faculty to ensure success of the course (Jones, 2003). Flexibility is another key element in any successful classroom—traditional or virtual. The very nature of the virtual learning environment enhances a student's "self-regulated learning skills" (McAllister & Watkins, 2012, p. 98). Thus, instruction must accommodate the learner's independent personal needs while promoting learner autonomy (Barbour, 2007).

Most educational programs, whether face-to-face or virtual, are goal-oriented. Virtual academy teachers can establish early assessments to determine the best course of action for a student's success: "Pre-course work assessments can provide distance educators with an understanding of who the student is and how the virtual school can best scaffold the student's success" (Black et al., 2008, p. 26). From this determination, the method and quantity of the material to be presented can be assessed. Keeping students engaged with short-term assignments and daily postings or discussion forums are essential (Pape, 2005). Larger projects and team activities should require progress check-ins to ensure students are active and have an adequate understanding of the concepts (Pape, 2005).

The learning effectiveness of a virtual class is determined by more than just lesson delivery and content. Attitude, communication, and technology skills play an important role in the learning environment. A positive attitude of the teacher influences students' reaction toward the virtual learning environment (Piccoli et al., 2001). Effective communication is crucial to an effective virtual learning environment. Facilitating discussions and engaging students through virtual communication is vital to ensure meaningful learning (Davis & Roblyer, 2005; Kingma & Keefe, 2006, Lim, 2005; Thompson & Zane, 2007). Success of a virtual class can be achieved by blending course content, positive attitude, technology skills, and good communication (Lim,

2005; Piccoli et al., 2001). Consequently, students' positive attitude and learning behavior influence the quality of virtual learning (Liu et al., 2010).

Virtual Curriculum Development

Along with the difference in virtual teaching strategies, attention must be given to development of curriculum for virtual programs. Even though virtual curriculum is available for purchase, some academies have developed curriculum to satisfy the specific needs for the school district as the one in this study. Successful virtual courses include some specific features which include the following:

> Recommendations for the redesign of online courses include using calendars to promote forethought and goal setting, providing online grade books, and ample feedback to assist students with self-monitoring their progress, clearly defining academic dishonesty and enforcing sanctions to promote the development of integrity and minimizing the use of online exams to reduce opportunities for cheating. (McAllister & Watkins, 2012, p. 100)

A backward approach to curriculum development can be beneficial for virtual schools. First, identifying the end goal and graduation requirements provide guidelines and a path for developing necessary strategies for curriculum. Once the specific requirements for the ultimate end goal have been determined, then specifics for course development can be determined. However, courses conducted through virtual academies, instead of traditional classrooms, are still responsible for satisfying federal graduation mandates, including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). According to the ESEA, students must demonstrate competency in English, math, science, history, and many other areas corresponding to the individual state guidelines upon leaving secondary education (United States, n.d.). With the enactment of the ESSA, all secondary education institutions must

focus on preparing students to be successful in college or a career (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Areas that must be addressed in virtual learning environments beyond course contents include honesty, flexibility, functionality, and communication. Unfortunately, academic honesty must be addressed in the virtual learning environment in the beginning developmental stages (Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009). Creating an honor code, incorporating authenticity statements, and providing students with a clear definition of cheating and plagiarism are recommended methods to address academic honesty (McAllister & Watkins, 2012).

Flexibility is an important aspect of the virtual learning environment. Students must be able to access course content anytime, anywhere (Pituch & Lee, 2006). Thus "assignments should be flexible and provide a choice of activities so that all students may participate using the technologies available to them" (Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009, p. 99). Curriculum flexibility can also be achieved via various technologies including interactive video feeds, taped lectures, and discussion boards or forums (Jones, 2003).

Success in a virtual learning environment can be influenced by functionality, interactivity, and ease-of-use of course technology (Barbour, 2007; Pituch & Lee, 2006). To ensure that students do not become frustrated with accessing course content, the "course developers should keep the navigation simple and to a minimum" (Barbour, 2007, p. 102). Technology that is perceived as difficult to use is not considered useful in reaching the desired goal and consequently can be detrimental to the student's performance (Pituch & Lee, 2006).

Good communication is important in any classroom but becomes essential for a virtual learning environment in order to relay requirements, expectations, and goals for a course. "Course developers should ensure students are given clear instructions and model expectations of

the style and level that will be required for student work" (Barbour, 2007, p. 103). A variety of communication methods can be utilized including e-mail, video-conferencing, and discussion forums, (Conn & Rue, 2011). Clearly defining instructional aspects such as course goals, assignment requirements, "classroom" expectations and procedures, providing a course syllabus, and interaction requirements at the beginning of the course augments students' success in the virtual learning environment (Pruchnicki, Bennett, Legg, & Mugnall, 2005; Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009). Clear communication by the instructor in a virtual learning environment also encourages students to use "more sophisticated cognitive learning strategies, such as organization and elaboration; and provide information on how to seek help" (McAllister & Watkins, 2012, p. 98).

Interactivity is an important characteristic of an effective virtual learning environment (Pituch & Lee, 2006). Even though student-instructor interaction is considered to the most significant factor for success in a virtual learning environment, student-to-student interaction is a critical component of an effective virtual program (Beebe et al., 2010; Jones, 2003; Pituch & Lee, 2006; Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009). To help promote this interaction, socializing features must be utilized in the virtual learning environment. Discussion boards, forums, blogs, instant messaging, and video-conferencing are some of the opportunities available for social interaction in the virtual learning environment (Boulton, 2008).

Promoting communication and interaction between students is not a natural development in the virtual learning environment and must be encouraged by the instructor. Developing assignments requiring teamwork, result analysis, and presentations encourage necessary student communication (El-Mowafy et al., 2013; Tunison & Sackney, 2004). Collaborative assignments require interaction between the students promoting the sharing of ideas and knowledge while building a sense of community (Lim, 2005; Tunison & Sackney, 2004). Utilization of

collaboration contradicts the criticism of no socialization in virtual education. Collaboration also addresses necessary issues of information analysis, increased technological capacity, self-advocacy, time-management, and effective communication via electronic media—all necessary skills for contributing citizens in today's ever-changing society (El-Mowafy et al, 2013; Grubbs et al., 2009; Pape, 2005; Piccoli et al., 2001).

Assessment methods in a virtual learning environment are an important consideration in course development. Informative and timely instructor feedback is considered as a motivator for student learning (Kachel et al., 2005; Lim & Kim, 2002-2003). Requiring students to participate in a minimum number of discussion boards and post answers to open-ended questions allow the instructor to quickly access students' understanding of the presented material (Chou & Tsai, 2002; McAllister & Watkins, 2012). Development of formal assessments must be done without losing focus on maintaining academic honesty in the virtual learning environment and content validity (Litwin, 1995; McAllister & Watkins, 2012). One method of formal assessment is written assignments. Utilizing written assignments as a formal assessment is an easy method of lowering the possibilities of academic dishonesty.

E-portfolios are another method of formal assessment which "are becoming more popular in assessing the proficiency of a student on either a particular skill or in a general field" (El-Mowafy et al., 2013, p. 139). An e-portfolio is a compilation of the student's work which provides the instructor a method of assessing practical skills and content understanding (El-Mowafy et al., 2013). With both written assessments and e-portfolios, templates and rubrics are beneficial. These tools provide specific requirements and practical feedback to the student (El-Mowafy et al., 2013; Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009).

Development of courses for the virtual learning environment must emphasize the concept of a learner-centered environment and focus on the student's perspective (Ryan & Beaulieu, 2009). The use of diverse instructional approaches, including discovery or inquiry learning, encourages the student to be actively engaged in the learning process and promotes learner independence (Barbour, 2007; Kachel et al., 2005; Tunison & Sackney, 2004). To develop a virtual curriculum which achieves desirable learning outcomes, a few general principles must be considered: "good structure, clear objectives, small units, plan participation, … synthesis, stimulation, variety, open ended, feedback and continuous feedback" (Barbour, 2007, p. 96).

Assessment Practices in the Virtual Learning Environment

In addition to teaching strategies and curriculum development, assessments in the virtual environment must also be adjusted from the traditional practices in the face-to-face environment. Instructors must have an understanding of appropriate assessment methods for virtual classes. "Assessment is not only an essential part of the teaching process but it is an obligatory component of the e-learning systems, according to accepted standards" (Nacheva-Skopalik & Green, 2009, p. 35). Assessment strategies and various instructional practices focus on enhancing student learning to produce a good virtual class. Understanding the different assessment practices for the virtual learning environment can be a consideration in what motivates a student to enroll in a public virtual academy. With the loss of face-to-face interaction, feedback and assessment practices must be evaluated. "An understanding of both assessment for learning and of learning is needed to support effective faculty practices and enhanced student learning in online courses" (Beebe et al., 2010, p. 2). In the virtual learning environment, teachers have access to a summary of all results, the number of students which have completed assignments, the average score of completed assessments, and an analysis item-

by-item (Dando, 2005). Assessments must be more than just counting the number of postings to the discussion board by the student (Beebe et al., 2010). This assessment alone does not adequately address student learning. A variety of assessment methods are available in the virtual classroom. Research assignments, discussion forums and postings, team projects, and tests are just a few assessments options that are effective in the virtual learning environment (Pape, 2005).

With the lack of face-to-face interaction, no verbal cues, and focus on student initiative, virtual instructors must implement assessment strategies that provide quick feedback that encourages student inquiry. Enthusiasm relayed through instructor communication is important. This enthusiasm can be accomplished through careful responses to student discussion forums; complimentary emails to students; and praising announcements to a group for work (Jones, 2003; Plummer, 2012). The relationship between the instructor and student is a variable in adequately conducting formative assessments. Instructors with a strong relationship with virtual students can conduct more efficient formative assessments (Conn & Rue, 2011).

A balance between formative and summative outcomes must be found in virtual assessment (Beebe et al., 2010). Formative assessments require planning but provide adequate opportunities for the sharing of information related to learned concepts before summative assessments (Conn & Rue, 2011). Virtual discussions can be assessed by learner autonomy and writing skills; while more complex content will require more difficult assessment methods (Beebe et al., 2010). Creative alternatives to tradition modes of assessment must be developed: "Due to the fact online learning requires higher degrees of self-discipline and self-monitoring of progress, metacognitive processes were found to be an important influence on student assessment" (Beebe et al., 2010, p. 7).

Advantages of Virtual Classes

There are many advantages recognized by secondary students participating in virtual programs, but whether or not these advantages contribute to the factors that motivate a student to enroll in public virtual academies has yet to be considered, until now. One advantage is enhanced technology skills obtained by students participating in the virtual programs which will improve students' marketability when attempting to enter the job market (Donlevy, 2003). Another advantage that is recognized by administrators as well as the students is the larger variety of courses offered without extra staffing and numerous schedule changes to the base school (Donlevy, 2003). This advantage is also noticed by small schools by allowing a broader range of courses that are normally offered only in larger schools (Donlevy, 2003; Garcia & Cuello, 2010; Learning & Carper, 2007). An advantage that leads to a motivating factor for economically disadvantaged students is the opportunity to experience another region's attributes without making a physical journey (Delgado-Garcia & Cuello, 2010). An additional advantage just for participating in a virtual class in the secondary schools is the flexibility of classes that are offered and an individual pace of learning (Anonymous, 2010a; Gold, 2012; Wilson, 2004). Collaborative learning with the integration of media enhancements contributes to student motivation (Miller et al., 2008). Students with disabilities can receive quality education and training via virtual education (Delgado-Garcia & Cuello, 2010; Diener, 2007). Individual student needs can be met with virtual education. Technology enhancements, varied paces, and individualized tutoring are some of the options available (Cavanaugh, 2004; Johnson & Bratt, 2009).

Secondary public school administrators utilize virtual education as an alternative in targeting students who otherwise drop out of high school (Wong, 2007). The nature of an online community encourages students to complete the course work resulting in credits earned for grade

promotion or graduation (White et al., 2007). A long-term benefit that most secondary students acquire from participating in virtual education is the development of self-directed and goal - oriented characteristics which carry through to post-secondary education (Matuga, 2009). For adolescents, especially girls, the virtual environment reduces peer pressure. Thus, according to previous research, "the awkwardness of face-to-face meetings no longer existed, leading to a greater sense of freedom and more authentic interaction among [the students]" (Tunison & Sackney, 2001, p. 40). Students with disabilities, such as attention deficit disorders or speech impediments, are more likely to interact with the class via Blackboard discussions and activities (Samsonov, Briggs, & Beard, 2009). Overall, students perceive the advantages of participating in virtual courses to be "access to better learning resources, saving time, more convenient scheduling, greater choice of courses, more flexible pace of learning, increased self-reliance, and improved computer literacy" (Kirby et al., 2010, p. 163). Whether or not these advantages, or other advantages and disadvantages, lead to motivating factors for students to enroll in public virtual academies was reviewed in this study.

The use of technology in education alone also provides unique benefits. Students have the ability to access information anytime from anywhere (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powell, 2005; Diener, 2007; Lim, 2005; Livingston & Condie, 2006; Nicholas & Ng, 2009). The flexibility of the virtual learning environment offers homeschoolers, students that travel or live abroad, returning adults, and even certain athletes an engaging opportunity to earn a high school diploma (DiGiorgio, 2004). Independent learning and problem solving are also promoted by virtual education (Lim 2005; Polat, Adiguzel, & Akgun, 2012). Relationships are fostered through communication with other students and the teachers in the virtual learning environment (Delgado-Garcia & Cuello, 2010; Piccoli, et al., 2001). Flexibility, problem solving, and online

communication contribute to the complete education received through virtual education programs. Self-motivation is an attribute obtained by students that are successful in virtual programs (Gold, 2012). Other beneficial skills that students develop from participating in a virtual program include self-discipline, organizational skills, study skills, increased information literacy and computer skills, independent acquisition of knowledge, and preparation for college and the business world (DiGiorgio, 2004; Grubbs et al., 2009; Kirby et al., 2010; Samsonov et al., 2009).

There are also advantages to virtual classes from the teachers' perspective that influence motivating factors for students to enroll in public virtual academies. One advantage is less discipline issues. Teachers are able to spend more time in "providing feedback and encouragement to students" (Tunison & Sackney, 2001, p. 40). Some critics have expressed concern that virtual classes will be used to purge the traditional classroom of troublesome students (Mupinga, 2005). Teacher-student relationships are still forged through virtual courses. Students may not be as afraid to share personal experiences in a virtual environment (Salyed, 2011). Teachers that facilitate virtual courses also experience a greater knowledge of technology and an appreciation of instructional resources for virtual courses (Donlevy, 2003). One concern of any teacher is how well students perform on standardized tests. Kingma and Keefe (2006) suggest that the virtual learning environment can be as good as traditional classroom-based instruction. Upon course completion, students in the virtual learning environment "perform as well or better than students in regular school programs" on state standardized tests (Johnson & Bratt, 2009, p. 33). K12 Inc. makes a case of correlation between the length of time a student is enrolled in a virtual school utilizing their curriculum and the likelihood of the students scoring favorably on the state exams. "The longer students have been enrolled in a K12 managed school,

the more likely they are to be proficient on state exams" ("K12 Issues Academic Report," 2013, p. 5).

Disadvantages of Virtual Classes

Along with advantages, disadvantages are recognized in regard to completing an education program via a virtual academy. To determine if any of these disadvantages impact factors that motivate students to enroll in public virtual academies, research requires identifying and analyzing some of the known disadvantages. Safety concerns, learning formats, and lack of social interaction are a few aspects of virtual programs that may be deemed as disadvantages.

Increased use of technology yields concerns that must be considered when establishing virtual education programs. Safety is a growing concern when adolescents spend many hours in the virtual world. Children and adolescents exhibit a false sense of security when socially interacting in the virtual forum (Csiernik et al., 2006). Obesity and the decreased level of physical activity are issues that have been addressed by politicians, educators, and parents. As the amount of time adolescents spend with technology increases, physical activity in sports and imaginative play has decreased (Csiernik et al., 2006).

Students learn in various formats. Virtual academies may not be suitable for all students such as those "with low reading abilities and problems with motivation may find it difficult to sustain interest in accomplishing all the learning activities…" (Donlevy, 2003, p. 120). The lack of social interaction is also a deterrent for some students. These students may experience increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and confusion because of the minimal social interaction (Piccoli et al., 2001). Personal contact adds to the overall learning experience (Davis, 2003; Donlevy, 2003). If a student has difficulty working independently, virtual courses can be intimidating. The asynchronous learning environment that allows for delayed reactions and

answers to questions can cause frustration for students that depend on face-to-face interactions (Lim & Kim, 2002-2003; Miers, Clark, Pollard, Rickaby, Thomas, & Turtle, 2007). Other disadvantages with virtual learning are technical difficulties from inferred assignment due dates and the lack of self-discipline (Serhan, 2010). Noncompulsory attendance in some virtual courses can also contribute to a student's lack of motivation (Nicholas & Ng, 2009). The lack of attendance accountability in the virtual learning environment can also lead to procrastination by the student (Reid et al., 2009). Immediate feedback/ assessment is another disadvantage for some students. Students perceive the feeling of isolation, technical problems, limited contact with students and instructors, communication problems, and ease of contributing to class discussions to be disadvantages of participating in virtual classes (Kirby et al., 2010).

Students with special needs may not benefit from virtual education to the fullest. Frequent personal contact in the classroom and exposure to mature adults in a position to instruct and guide are additional advantages in face-to-face instruction (Donlevy, 2003). Sufficient data is not currently available to merit strong recommendation of virtual classes for assisting students with disabilities in completing high school (Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010).

Solely using technology to provide assignments is not adequate for any virtual academy to be successful. "Significant training time for teachers and support for online participation [are critical elements] in the success of an online venture" (Donlevy, 2003, p. 120). The amount of professional development needed for teachers at the beginning of a virtual academy startup can be overwhelming and thus become a deterrent for any school system. The number of students enrolled in a course is an important factor for the development of a successful virtual program. A high enrollment can lead to a decrease in the amount of student-instructor interactivity resulting in potential "delays in student evaluation and progress" (Kingma & Keefe, 2006, p.

130). In the virtual learning environment, downtime due to technology problems can be devastating to class due dates and access to curriculum data. Having adequate information technology is a costly necessity for an effective virtual learning environment.

For a virtual education program to be successful, certain barriers must be addressed along with adequate teacher training. These barriers include technology support, administrative structure, effective evaluation methods, quality social interaction, support services for students and faculty, time requirements and compensation for faculty, and legal issues (Thompson & Zane, 2007). Even though the internet may not be for all students (Buzhardt & Heitzman-Powel, 2005), students in virtual education programs demonstrate knowledge in today's digital society (Gold, 2012).

Parental Influences

Just as the recognized advantages and disadvantages of participating in a virtual program should be considered when deciding to enroll in a public virtual academy, parental influences must also be considered when assessing motivational factors in decision making of secondary students. Parental involvement in the classroom takes on a new meaning for virtual schools. Parents must be involved to the point of being considered a learning coach or parent-teacher (Butler, 2008). Responsibilities of parents to students enrolled in virtual education programs normally increase as compared to responsibilities of traditional schools (Sorensen, 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand why parents encourage enrollment in a virtual academy for their children. Research by Klein and Poplin (2008) cite numerous reasons parents promote virtual academies for their children's education which include:

- To provide instruction at home where they have greater control over their children's education

- To benefit from the individualized program pacing
- To increase direct involvement with their children's education
- To have flexibility to plan learning activities around the family schedule (Table 2).

With the growth of virtual learning opportunities, it is important for parents to understand the student and the specific virtual program for influencing a choice that is not detrimental to the student (Pape, 2005).

Among the advantages of a virtual education from a parent/guardian point-of-view are the flexibility and pace at which the student can complete required course work (Sorensen, 2012). Teacher-parent communication is encouraged for all secondary education programs—traditional or virtual. Unfortunately, the teacher-parent communication can be difficult in the traditional environment due to the limited time teachers and parents are available at corresponding times to sufficiently communicate. An increase and the ease of interacting with virtual education teachers are favored aspects of virtual education for parents and guardians (Sorensen, 2012). Parents also witness student learning and growth (Sorensen, 2012). In some situations, such as charter virtual schools or private virtual academies, parents encourage this education method for their student due to previous personal negative public school experiences, to maintain family and religious values, and to take advantage of the variety of program structures (Klein & Poplin, 2008). An additional reason that a parent promotes a virtual program for his/her student is the extra amount of time the parent can spend with the child. After spending additional time with the student, the parent will know the student better and can "guide them toward future goals" (Klein & Poplin, 2008).

Parents also experience challenges with virtual education. These challenges can include keeping the students on schedule and organized, technical issues, perceived lack of socialization,

and increased parent responsibility (Sorensen, 2012). From the parents' perspective, the positives of virtual education outweigh the negatives (Sorensen, 2012). What is best for the student and the individual situation lead the parent in the decision of virtual education.

Guidance Counselor Influences

Along with parents, guidance counselors have an influence on educational decisions of adolescents. "Academic advisors are exposed to a variety of opportunities, enhancement problems, and choices as technology becomes more prevalent" (Feghali et al., 2011, p. 82). A high school counselor provides guidance to students in regards to secondary courses, as well as counseling students with problems and providing preparation for college and career development (Dodson, 2009). Whether an academic or guidance counselor works with students in a brick-and-mortar or virtual school, knowledge relating to the academic programs and curricula requirements for the specific institution is necessary to adequately advise any student (Feghali, et al., 2011). Virtual learning "requires not only the ability to listen, read, and write, but also the technical competence and network depth to create a learning community in cyberspace" (Lui et al., 2010, p. 93). If a student is currently in a traditional face-to-face classroom, a guidance counselor should have enough information regarding the student's learning behavior to offer assistance in a decision toward virtual education. Guidance counselors and academic advisors are in an ideal situation to offer assistance to students and parents in making quality academic decisions (Feghali et al., 2011). With adequate appraisal of student needs and suitable knowledge of enrollment policies, counselors can provide educational intervention for possible at-risk students by recommending virtual programs (Black et al., 2008; Molnar, 2013).

When a secondary student is contemplating enrolling in a public virtual academy, guidance counselors are in a position to offer advice and assistance in making this decision. Any

information provided by the guidance counselor can influence the motivating factors for secondary students considering enrollment in a public virtual academy. The impact, or influence, a guidance counselor can make on a student's education decision is important and cannot be dismissed.

Current Virtual Schools

When deciding to enroll in a public virtual academy, administrators and counselors must consider the data regarding current virtual programs and how they can influence motivating factors for the students. For many years, politicians have made education a point of contention in campaigns. Successes and failures of public school systems are distorted to validate a politician's theory. Consequently, school choice has become a prominent issue in the United States. Magnet schools, charter schools, virtual schools, and school vouchers are some of the choices now available to parents and students. Virtual schools "constitute one of the fastest-growing forms of school choice" (Miron, Horvitz, & Gulosino, 2013, p. 4). As of 2016-2017, 429 full-time virtual schools operated in 34 states with Michigan having the most at 49 (Miron, Shank, & Davidson, 2018). Online education is a burgeoning option for public school students: "Enrollments in virtual schools increased by 17,000 students between the 2015-16 and 2016-17 [school years]" (Miron et al., 2018, p. 4). Out of the 429 full-time virtual schools, 225 are district operated while the remaining 204 are charter virtual schools (Miron et al., 2018). Even though enrollment continued to increase for both district and charter virtual schools, "new district operated schools continued to add significantly to the pool of full-time virtual schools" (Miron et al., 2018, p. 16). While almost half of virtual schools are charter virtual schools and account for 75% of student enrollment, upper secondary level students are mainly served by district operated virtual schools (Miron et al., 2018). There is also a sector of virtual schools ran

by Education Management Organizations (EMOs). In 2016-17, K12 Inc. was the largest EMO, with Connections Academy a distant second (Miron et al., 2018). Data collected from the different sectors of virtual schools indicates that "district operated virtual schools performed better than their … counterparts" (Miron et al., 2018, p. 34).

District and state operated virtual schools are created for a variety of reasons. In Illinois, the Large Unit District Association (LUDA) Education Foundation and the Center for the Application of Information Technologies (CAIT) worked together to create a virtual school in order to provide Dual Enrollment courses to high school students. This collaboration resulted in LUDA-VHS with emphasis on alternative methods to serve "the needs of school districts and providing quality education to high school students in Illinois" (Vrasides, 2003, p. 16). LUDA Education Foundation contributes part of the virtual high school success to the online environment that encourages multiple levels of interaction, such as student to student and student to teacher (Vrasides, 2003). The Illinois Virtual High School has targeted low-income, inner-city neighborhoods where the brick-and-mortar schools have a difficult time keeping qualified teachers in key subject areas (Wood, 2002).

The most important measure of success of any educational program is the academic growth of the students. By this measure Ohio Virtual Academy (OHVA) has proven to be successful. Because of the individualized learning program offered through virtual learning, struggling students have shown to have academic gains. "The longer these students stay in OHVA, the better they perform on achievement tests" (Anonymous, 2011c, p. 79). Another virtual academy in Ohio is the Virtual Academy at Great Oaks Institute of Technology and Career Development. Besides the benefits of flexibility and individualized instruction, this

virtual academy also recognized that students developed necessary skills and habits vital for jobs in the new information age (Patterson, 2001).

Arizona increased the state's education program by opening Arizona Virtual School that offers programs for kindergarten through high school students (Anonymous, 2011a). Arizona Virtual School offers a blended program that combines the virtual classes with instruction from a specific school site (Anonymous, 2011a). Minnesota included an "xTeam" to encourage success in the virtual academy. The xTeam is "a combination of teachers, advisors, counselors, and customer support representatives" that are dedicated to helping each student be successful and achieve their fullest potential (Anonymous, 2008b, p, 7). Oregon is using virtual courses to provide any student across the state an opportunity at an excellent public education (Anonymous, 2008a). In order for students to receive a high quality public education wherever an internet connection is found, California has ventured into the virtual education field (California Virtual Academies, 2010). Teachers of virtual classes can even organize field trips to promote relationship building, instruction, and motivation. The Horizon Academy promotes the development of analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information in their virtual students (Anonymous, 2010a). The desired result is for students to learn how to effectively communicate with other people.

Home school families are taking advantage of the virtual academies as well as states and local public education institutions. Families view virtual academies as a way for their children to stay connected to public schooling, but to opt-out of the traditional format (Calvert, 2009). The online learning environment provides parents the opportunity to control what the students are learning.

Summary

Many situations and relationships can contribute to motivating factors for the adolescent secondary student that chooses to attend a public virtual academy. Currently, virtual education is utilized for a plethora of reasons: students with disabilities, grade recovery, and students with special needs are just a few. Kirby et al. (2010) found comparable results among those in traditional, face-to-face classrooms and virtual learners. How the recognized advantages and disadvantages of participating in virtual education influence a decision to enroll in a virtual program was reviewed in this study. There are many influential factors to one making a decision, especially an adolescent. These influential factors could include parent(s), guardian(s), counselor(s), or even gathered data from other virtual programs. Fortunately, more high schools are offering virtual programs as alternative solutions to education for a diverse population of students (Vrasidas, 2003). Virtual programs are an alternative option in which K-12 students can be successful.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach was utilized for this study to determine the phenomenon of why secondary students enroll in virtual academies. The true essence of a phenomenon is achieved only after self-reflection or interpretation of the lived experience. Retrospection of a personal experience provides insight and direction. It was important to guide the participants in the reflection process to obtain meaningful themes of the phenomenon. Reflection on the lived space, body, time, and human relations provides insightful discovery and disclosure to create a valid them (van Manen, 1990). In this chapter, the methods and procedures for answering the research questions were examined. According to Creswell (2007), "A phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (p. 57). The research process and methodology outlined includes participant and site selection, data collection, data analysis, means of ensuring trustworthiness, and ethical concerns. The goal of this examination was to determine why secondary students enroll in virtual academies instead of the traditional brick-and-mortar high school. To obtain this research goal, several individuals that share the common experience of enrolling in a specific virtual program were studied to determine the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Design

Discovering meanings or commonalities is the purpose for conducting a phenomenological qualitative study (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). Van Manen (1990) writes, "Phenomenology is a philosophy of action always in a personal and situated sense" (p. 154). Therefore, it is essential to study participants in their individual natural surroundings and conditions to obtain the truthful essence of each individual's experiences. For this reason, a

hermeneutic phenomenological study was the best approach to answer the research questions of this study, by understanding numerous individual experiences and determining any commonalities. This qualitative research design provided the necessary analytical framework for this investigation to answer the research questions. The purpose of using a phenomenological research approach was to interpret the individual lived experiences of the students (Creswell, 2007). In order to make interpretations, conversations took place which required reflection upon the thought process used in the choice for the student to participate in the virtual academy. Conducting an interpretational analysis of the data permitted grouping to completely illustrate, assess, and interpret the phenomenon as to why high school students enroll in virtual schools (Gall et al., 2010).

The philosophy guiding a phenomenological study is to gain meaning and the essence of the lived experiences (Gall et al., 2010). Phenomenology is a human science that uses the lived experience as the subject matter (van Manen, 1990). Thus, a phenomenological study does not only consider the action taken, but the who and why, as well as the relationship to the circumstance. "Phenomenological research gives us tactful thoughtfulness: situational perceptiveness, discernment, and depthful understanding" (van Manen, 1990, p. 156). Combining the phenomenology philosophy with the philosophy of hermeneutics—understanding specific conditions for the actions (Gall et al., 2010)—supplied the framework for this research. By interrupting the individual experiences, the objective for this study was to understand the motivating factors for students to enroll in virtual academies, students' goals related to graduating high school, students' perceptions on guidance counselors in relation to virtual academies, and the students' views of advantages and disadvantages related to enrolling in a virtual academy. Reflection upon the lived experience – motivating factors in the situation –

provides hermeneutic significance to the study. By deliberating on past experiences, fundamental meanings were uncovered of the human in relation to the circumstances and situations. "Various thinkers have noted that lived experience first of all has a temporal structure: it can never be grasped in its immediate manifestation but only reflectively as past presence" (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

With the research designed as qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study, the theoretical framework was based on a social constructivist paradigm and motivation theory. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Ryan's and Deci Self-Determination Theory of motivation are analyzed in evaluating various factors that influence the decision of secondary students to enroll in public virtual academies. Being that hermeneutic phenomenology is considered to be a human science (van Manen, 1990), and Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory views humans as being self-motivated (Owens & Valesky, 2011), merging these theories for the research design of this study was a natural union.

Research Questions

The central question for this hermeneutical phenomenological study was as follows: What are the motivating factors of secondary students for enrolling in a virtual academy? There are also three sub-questions that were addressed this study. Following are these sub-questions:

1. How do students believe virtual classes will aid in obtaining the goal of graduation from high school?
2. What is the perception of secondary students on how guidance counselors influence their decision to enroll in a virtual academy?
3. What does the student see as the perceived advantages and disadvantages experienced related to the choice of enrolling in a virtual academy?

Setting

The online high school academy for this study was part of a public city school division in a rural, mountainous area of Northeast Tennessee. Along with the online academy, this public school district includes one brick-and-mortar high school, one middle school, and three elementary schools. TeViA (pseudonym for the chosen school) was chosen for many reasons. One reason was the location. The next closest base of an online public school for the state is approximately 110 miles ("Welcome to TOPS", n.d.). Next, TeViA was created by a local public school system and not a for-profit organization. The third reason why TeViA was chosen as the study site was the specific curriculum development. Curriculum and course requirements were developed by the base school system and align with state standards for standardized testing and graduation. The leadership within this school system is organized in the same fashion as many other systems with a superintendent, assistant superintendent, and building principals, including a principal assigned just for the online academy. All students considered in-state residents may apply for enrollment in the online academy. There are no specific requirements for a student to attend other than having residence within the state and completion of an application. The application is online for all potential students to access. A collaborative decision is made by the principal, the counselor, the student, and the parents/guardians of whether or not the online school is appropriate for the student. A computer and internet connection are the only required materials the student must provide. All materials, including texts, are provided online to the student by the school district.

Even though TeViA was chosen as the base school and participants were selected from these rosters, the specific setting for the research was the individual participant's home in order to obtain a clear interpretation of the student's experiences. By conducting interviews in the

students' natural environment, the intent was to appreciate the unique circumstances and situations of each participant.

Participants

Phenomenological qualitative research is conducted with a small number of participants which makes the selection of participants essential to obtaining significant and accurate data. Collecting extensive detail regarding the participants and relations to the phenomena is essential for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007). For this phenomenological study, criterion sampling was used to determine participants. Criterion sampling involves individuals which meet certain criteria (Creswell, 2007; Palys, n.d.). The criteria for participant selection was students, male and female, between the ages of 14 to 18 that are currently enrolled full time in TeViA. The TeViA principal provided email addresses of the students that meet the criteria. The principal contacted the students, via email, to advise that a request to participate in this study was valid. Parental permission for participation in the research was obtained prior to providing reflective journal questions and conducting the semi-structured interviews. Student confidentiality was maintained by the use of pseudonyms.

Even though Creswell (2007) recommends three to ten participants for phenomenological research, data for this study was gathered from 12 participants. A goal of data gathering is to achieve saturation, meaning gathering new information does not provide additional properties of the phenomena (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). Various geographic locations through the state which services the online academy were represented by interviewing students at each participant's individual residence. The data was saturated with these participants and required no additional data collection from any additional subjects that qualified from the original criterion sampling.

Procedures

To ensure applicable ethical standards were included in the research design, an application was submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review and approved (Appendix D). The school district of which the virtual academy is a part for this research requires all forms distributed to their students to be approved by the Office of Special Populations and Student Services. These forms were submitted for approval to this office immediately upon receiving research approval from the IRB. Once approval was received from this office, a meeting was conducted with the TeViA principal to explain the study, participant criteria, and receive student email addresses to make contact. Students were then contacted via email (Appendix A) requesting participation with a brief explanation of required expectations. Upon email receipt of agreement to participate, each student was then sent a Consent Form (Appendix B). No data collection was conducted with participants until receipt of the signed Parental Consent Form.

The data collection was comprised of three elements – reflective journals, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, and personal observation notations. First, participants were asked to reflect on experiences while attending class in the virtual academy. The second element included semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Each interview was audio taped utilizing a digital recorder. The third element for data collection was observations of the students to obtain further understanding of the information collected from the reflective journals and personal interviews. Notations of important points and unique surroundings were made.

Once the data gathering process was completed, data analysis began. Textual and structural descriptions were created once the attribute coding, structural coding, and horizontalization of data was completed. After coding, the essential structure from the emerging

themes were generated through comprehensive interpretation of the data and provided the thorough explanations of why secondary students enroll in virtual academies.

The Researcher's Role

The subjectivity of qualitative research required a complete understanding of the researcher's point of view and personal traits as related to the research (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). I had no connection with TeViA or the potential participants in this study. My role was to gather sufficient data during the interviews and non-participatory observations to determine the phenomena for this study. To ensure credibility and integrity of the study, reflexivity was incorporated during data collection and analysis.

As an administrator and former secondary teacher in a public school system, the researcher witnessed many situations in which a virtual academy might be a viable option for completing high school for many students. The researcher assumed not every student would be successful or wish to participate in a virtual academy, thus prompting the question what motivates a secondary student to enroll in a virtual academy.

Data Collection

A central concern for a qualitative study is the adequacy of the data collection. For a phenomenological study, data collection is the researcher's attempt to gain understanding and experience through the subjects' reflection. In this study, the three data collection formats utilized were reflective journals, face-to-face semi-structured interviews of student participants, and interview notations from the participant interviews. Utilizing the triangulation strategy for data collection enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the research findings and aided in resolving any discrepancies (Gall et al., 2010). Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality.

The data collection process took place over a two-month time during the 2016-2017 school year. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, the reflective journal served as a tool to gain insight of each student participant's experiences of participating in virtual courses. The interview process provided clarification of the virtual academy experience. Also, the interview process provided a means of creating a relationship between the researcher and participant which allowed for meaningful interpretations of the participants' experiences (Maxwell, 2005). Observations of participants added validity and understanding to the reflection of participant experiences.

Reflective Journals

Data collection began with reflective journals from each student. Reflective journals required participants to begin the process of giving thought to all circumstances that influenced the decision to be a student in a virtual learning environment. Reflection of the experience was the backbone to the phenomenological research.

> The point of phenomenological research is to "borrow" other people's experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to be able to come to an understanding of the … significance of an aspect of human experience in the context of the whole of human experience. (van Manen, 1990, p. 62)

Journals with prompting questions were provided to each participant. The journals and prompting questions were identical for each participant. As soon as the consent form was completed, the journal questions were provided to the participant. Each participant had a choice of receiving the journal in electronic format via email, or a hardcopy format. The participant then completed the reflective journal within a two weeks' time period. Upon completion of the reflective journal, it was returned to me. If a hardcopy of the reflective journal was completed,

an address, postage paid envelope was provided to the participant. Once the reflective journal was received, a review of the journal was conducted prior to the non-participatory observations in order for clarification to be made of questionable entries into the reflective journals.

In asking participants to reflect on personal situations that encouraged the decision for enrolling in a virtual academy, the following prompts were provided in the reflective journals:

1. The year before enrolling in a public virtual academy, my family circumstances changed by…
2. What did you not like about attending a brick-and-mortar school?
3. What was your opinion or thoughts regarding a virtual academy before enrolling?
4. Did you know anyone enrolled in a virtual academy prior to your enrolling and how are they related?
5. How do you think this person influenced your decision to enroll in the academy?
6. People I know influenced my decision to enroll in a virtual academy by …

Prompts one, four, five, and six relate to the influence others and the environment have on one's motivating factors. "Self-determination theory [of motivation] is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 58). Prompt one specifically relates to family situations and the influence on the participant. "Early family experiences are important influences over the dominant values" (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007, p. 99). Parents have a significant influence on motivating factors of the participant, yet others who hold pivotal relationships with the participant will also guide the student to internalize situations that persuade decisions (Al-Dhamit & Kreishan, 2016; Guay, Vallerand, & Blanchard, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Prompts two and three refer to the participant's perception of a virtual school before enrolling and how this perception possibly influenced the motivating factors to attend a public virtual academy. Much has been written regarding the advantages and disadvantages of virtual courses that could influence the perception of the participants prior to enrolling in a virtual academy. The perceived advantages of disadvantages of virtual program along with the home environment impacts the participants' motivation (Hayenga & Corpus, 2010). The participant's written reflection also provided an insight for direction during the interview process.

Interviews

Once participants completed the reflective journal, a follow-up semi-structured face-to-face interview was conducted to gain an understanding into each participant's experience, derive the true essence of the phenomenon, and obtain clarification of situations described in the reflective journals. Each participant was asked the same questions; however, the interview was conducted as a conversational interview. A "conversation lends itself especially well to the task of reflecting on the themes of the … phenomenon under study" (van Manen, 1990, p. 98). The goal was to obtain a true reflection of the participants' lived experiences in order to generate an underlying theme for participating in a virtual learning environment. Interview questions were open-ended to obtain unanticipated answers and a more honest description of the phenomenon (Fowler Jr., 2009). To ensure the face validity of the interview questions, students not involved with the study were asked to express the meaning of each interview question. If the descriptions of the questions generated by these students indicated the use of appropriate language and questions related to desired information, the interview questions had face validity (Fink, 1995).

One means to ensure consistent measurement in the interview process was to ask the same set of interview questions of each respondent (Fowler Jr., 2009). A semi-structured

interview concept was used. This type of interview structure began with a prepared set of open-ended interview questions, which led to probing questions to gather further detail (Roulston, 2010). The set of pre-determined open-ended questions were used to begin the interview in order to obtain unanticipated answers and a more real description of the phenomenon (Fowler Jr., 2009). Understanding a person's motivation requires an examination of an individual's needs (Bauer & Erdogan, 2007). The original set of main interview questions was broad, open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to elaborate on their personal experiences and needs. "These broad initiating questions encourage the … [participant] … to provide in an unfiltered way their own take on an issue and as such often evoke unexpected themes" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 161). Following are the main open-ended questions that were asked of each participant:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please describe your life situations that contribute to enrolling in a virtual academy.
2. Please describe goals and desires not related to education or school that contributed to your enrolling in a virtual academy.
3. Please describe the challenges you faced while attending a brick-and-mortar school.
4. How did your parents influence or motivate your decision to enroll in a virtual academy?
5. How did guidance counselors assist in your decision to enroll in a virtual academy?
6. How did other individuals, besides your parents and guidance counselors influence your decision to enroll in a virtual academy?
7. Please describe how you think attending a virtual academy will help you obtain your goals in high school and after.

8. What do you consider to be the advantages you have experienced by enrolling in a virtual academy as opposed to attending a brick-and-mortar school and did you expect to experience these advantages?
9. What do you consider to be the disadvantages you have experienced by enrolling in a virtual academy as opposed to attending a brick-and-mortar school and did you expect to experience these disadvantages?

The purpose of these questions was to gather information from the participants related to their goals, needs, desires, and influences which motivated the decision of choosing to enroll in a public virtual academy. Questions one through three were developed to determine social and environmental factors that contribute to the participant's motivation for enrolling in a public virtual academy. "Self-determination [motivational] theory is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 58). Questions one and two are specifically designed to obtain a picture of the experiences outside of a school environment that contributed to intrinsic motivation for making life decisions.

Self-efficacy is an attribute of the Self-Determination Theory of motivation and social cognitive theories. Question three gave consideration to self-efficacy. An aspect of self-efficacy is avoidance of situations in which one does not feel capable of succeeding (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Therefore, question three was developed to identify possible situations in which the participant did not feel competent or unable to overcome a challenge. In turn, recognizing competence as one of the three innate psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory of motivation (Szalma, 2004) in which the participant is attempting to satisfy.

Questions four through six were developed to identify any individual the participant perceives as influencing the decision to enroll in a public virtual academy. Another innate psychological need identified by Szalma (2014) is supportiveness and attachment to others. These questions aimed to measure how much an individual influenced the participant's decisions.

Questions seven through nine relate specifically to the definition of Self-Determination Theory of motivation. The participants' reflection on being enrolled in a public virtual academy identified satisfaction that contributed to their intrinsic motivation: "Self-determination theory is a theory of motivation, personality, and development that proposes that intrinsic motivation derived purely from the satisfaction inherent in the activity itself…" (Guiffrida et al., 2013, p. 121).

Literature related to the Self-Determination Theory of motivation identifies three innate psychological needs as the basis for motivation—autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Szalma, 2014). Additionally, Szalma (2014) identifies three behaviors associated with motivation in general – direction, energy, and persistence. Each of these interview questions necessitated participants to reflect on situations and circumstances that encouraged direction, expend energy, and continual persistence to obtain the goal of enrolling in a public virtual academy.

In a quest for a productive interview, it was imperative to personally engage the participant "so that the interaction is focused on and tailored very individually to the respondent" (Fowler Jr., 2009, p. 128). In order to personalize the interview, it was necessary to interject probing questions. When a participant's answers to the main interview questions did not adequately answer the main research questions or provide ample detail to develop a theme,

probing questions were asked which were not determined prior to the interview. "Probes help you … clarify unclear sentences or phrases, filling missing steps, and keeping the conversation on topic" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 164).

To ensure the face validity of the interview questions, a random selection of students between the ages of 14 to 18 was asked to express the meaning of each interview question. If the descriptions given indicate the use of appropriate language and questions related to desired information, the interview questions had face validity (Fink, 1995). By using the same set of main questions for each participant, another practice to ensure consistent measurement and validity was used (Fowler Jr., 2009).

Each interview was digitally recorded, and then personally transcribed. The transcription process provided an opportunity to thoughtfully reflect on each interview for needed data analysis. Copies of the transcripts were supplied to each participant for review, correction, and signature verification.

Interview Notes

During the face-to-face semi-structured interviews and after the interview, reflective notations were taken. Interviewer notes included important terms or emphasized phrases stated by the participant (Saldaña, 2009). Nonverbal observations that add substance or clarity to a participant's statement are also added to interviewer notations (Harrell & Bradley, 2009). Notations were also made of the interview surroundings. A participant's surroundings contribute to the interpretation of the information provided by each participant (Saldaña, 2009).

Data Analysis

Coding was used to determine various themes and reasons for enrolling in a virtual academy. Attribute coding was conducted for logging essential demographic data relating to all

participants (Saldaña, 2009). Memorandums and notations were added to reflective journal entries, interview notes, and observation forms to create initial codes. For this phenomenological study, data was analyzed for significant statements and quotes from the reflective journals, interviews, and observations to provide an understanding of the participants' experience which is considered horizontalization (Creswell, 2007). Structural coding was then utilized for the interview notes to create codes and initial categories of data (Saldaña, 2009). This type of analysis allowed for developing a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements. Grouping of codes and themes allowed for the creation of meaningful themes to answer the research questions. Constant comparison of the generated codes was employed to find "commonalities in the data that reflect the underlying meaning of, and relationships among, the coding categories" (Gall et al., 2010, p. 351). Textual, structural, and composite descriptions of the phenomenon were created from the statements. By using the data to answer the questions "What," "How" and "Why" the essence of the phenomenon was developed. Data collection of the individual involvement in a virtual academy will contribute to a "composite description of the essence of the experience" (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). From creating these descriptions, the core of the research questions was reached.

Trustworthiness

The goal of hermeneutic qualitative research is to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human lived experience which uncovers themes toward defining the phenomena (Tong, Flemming, McInnes, Oliver, & Craig, 2012; van Manen, 1990). To reach this goal, trustworthy findings must be presented which adequately interprets the experiences described by each participant (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). There are numerous methods

within qualitative research to address credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability which will increase confidence in and validate the results.

Credibility

Credibility within a qualitative research study refers to adequately communicating findings so that confidence in the findings is achieved, as well as a complete understanding of the participants' experiences reached (Barusch, Gringer, & George, 2011; Morrow, 2005). Numerous strategies can be used to reach credibility in qualitative research. In this study prolonged engagement, method triangulation, and member checking were used. Prolonged engagement requires a sufficient amount of time to be spent with each participant to develop a necessary rapport to achieve an adequate understanding of each perspective and identify any discrepancy or distortion of the data (Barusch et al, 2011). Method triangulation is the use of different methods to collect data (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, & Neville, 2014). Participant reflective journals, face-to-face interviews, and non-participatory observations were the methods used to gather data. By using these data collection methods, the triangulation strategy provided an opportunity to resolve any discrepancy in the findings which strengthens the credibility. Member checking allowed the study participants to reflect on the accuracy and validity of the data interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

Dependability

The ability to follow the researcher's decisions, process to ascertain the findings, and being consistent relates to the dependability of the qualitative research (Farrelly, 2013; Morrow, 2015; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). "The idea of dependability emphasis the need for the research to account for the ever changing context within which research occurs" (Farrelly, 2013, p. 150). To obtain dependability, also considered reliability, an audit trail was maintained in this study to

keep record of decisions and the justification for the decisions (Lietz et al, 2006). Also, to add to the research dependability, maintaining audio recordings provided reliability to the data collection by documenting the actual interviews.

Transferability

In qualitative research, transferability refers to the repeatability of the research and ability to apply findings to other places and people (Barusch et al, 2011; Morrow, 2005). The audit trail maintained for ensuring dependability also contributed to transferability. Another "strategy to establish transferability is to provide a dense description of the population studied by providing descriptions of demographics and geographic boundaries of the study" (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011).

Conformability

Finally, once credibility, dependability, and transferability have occurred in qualitative research then conformability can be established (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Along with an audit trail, reflexivity is an important key strategy in obtaining conformability. By including personal thoughts and reflection regarding each participant's interview, a sense of trust was created toward the findings (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Reflexivity is important to qualitative research because it forces the researcher to access how their personality may affect the process of presenting research findings (Lietz et al, 2006). Thus, written researcher notes were made following each participant interview and included in the audit trail.

Conclusions

Key strategies that were used to create trustworthiness in this qualitative research includes method triangulation, member-checking, prolonged engagement, audit trail, and reflexivity. Thick description is another strategy that strengthens the integrity and

trustworthiness of presented findings. A thick description is achieved by providing "direct quotes with well-developed interpretations" (Barusch et al, 2011). Using numerous key strategies, providing direct quotes in the findings and thoroughly communicating each step of the research process established rigor in this qualitative research and confidence in the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Student participant involvement in this research was purely voluntary and with parental permission. No financial restitution was provided to any participant. After all field research was completed, a gift card was offered to each student participant as an expression of appreciation. Participants were not involved in any physical activity. The only emotional activity was that of being interviewed which made any risk to the participants minimal. At least one parent was present at the home during the interview and observation. Parents were not asked to participate in the student participant interviews, but their presence helped to maintain compliance with ethical research considerations.

Student and parent confidentiality were maintained by assignment of pseudonyms. Specific names and home locations were not published. All data was maintained in a secure location and kept confidential. Only data pertaining to data collection and analysis used for sufficiently answering research questions is published in this study. All digital records have been converted to compact disks for final storage. There is no plan to reuse data for future studies; thus duplication or similar research of this study requires new subjects. Storage of data is only for the purpose of providing backup to any unforeseen legal or academic challenges to the study.

Summary

This study's purpose was to explore why high school students enroll in virtual academies instead of attending the traditional brick-and-mortar school. A hermeneutic phenomenological research design provided an optimum analytical framework to investigate the underlying reasons for this option. The goal for the hermeneutic phenomenological research was to construct a narrative that describes common themes of the participants lived actions, behaviors, and experiences in each individual's surroundings while staying true to the lived experience. Criteria sampling and random sampling strategies were used to determine voluntary student participants. Data collection included reflective journals, personal interviews, and observations. All names were given pseudonyms and any collected documentation was assigned numbers to maintain confidentiality. In vivo coding and structural coding were used before theming the data. Confidentiality and ethical standards were maintained throughout the process. Chapter Three provides the theoretical basis for which data was obtained and analyzed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to determine what motivates secondary students to complete high school through a public virtual academy. Only secondary students between the ages of 14 and 18 provided the data for this study through reflective journals and person-to-person interviews. A description of each participant's current situation and analysis of participant responses received sought to effectively identify a specific motivator or multiple motivators for encouraging these students to leave a traditional brick-and-mortar classroom and choose to attend a virtual academy. After participants completed a reflective journal answering questions related to their individual life experiences, a face-to-face semi-structured interview allowed for clarification of journal answers and an opportunity to have a more complete understanding of the participants' answers.

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this research. Addressing the following questions formed the emergent themes in the chapter. The central question for this study was what are the motivating factors of secondary students for enrolling in a virtual academy? The first sub-question that added to the themes was how do students believe virtual classes will aid in obtaining the goal of graduating from high school? The second sub-question that contributed to developed themes was what is the perception of secondary schools on how guidance counselors influence their decision to enroll in a virtual academy? The last and third sub-question was what do the students see as their defining lived experience related to the choice of enrolling in a virtual academy? After all data was collected and analyzed, commonalities of the participants' experiences were examined to determine shared themes. Chapter Three outlined the data analysis procedure.

Participants

Collectively, 12 participants participated in this research study and shared their experiences related to enrolling and attending a virtual academy. All participants were enrolled in the same public virtual high school and required to be between the ages of 14 and 18 and sought out the public virtual academy. Four of the twelve participants were male. The composition of ethnicities for the participants was one African-American, one Asian, nine Caucasians, and one Hispanic. To protect the anonymity of each participant, a pseudonym was assigned.

Permission was obtained from TeViA's principal to contact the students, collect data through a reflective journal, and a face-to-face semi-structured interview. The principal provided school email addresses as a way to make an initial contact with the participant. The principal notified students that any email from my address would be valid and appropriate to view. An initial email was sent to the students of TeViA with a short explanation of the study and what would be essential for this research. From this initial contact with the students, only 15 students returned an email with interest in participating in the study. Parental consent forms were sent to each of the students that replied to this initial email contact, with 12 being signed and returned. All 12 students that returned the parental consent form completed the reflective journal. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were completed with 11 of the participants. Those that participated in a face-to-face interview had the opportunity to verify the transcription of the interview.

Lindsey

One student, Lindsey, only participated by completing the reflective journal. The information she shared in her reflective journal was used in the data analysis by identifying

common phrases. By not completing the semi-structured interview, I was unable to obtain any personal demographic information to have a deeper understanding of her situation.

Alice

Alice began attending K12 Inc., a virtual academy, in the seventh grade. As a freshman, she enrolled with TeViA. Being bullied and teased contributed to her decision to enroll in a virtual academy, and continue with TeViA, a public virtual high school. Her mother found TeViA and provided this as an option to the brick-and-mortar high school. TeViA was also recommended by a K12, Inc. teacher. "[S]he thought it would be at my academic level and would work well for me" (Reflective Journal, March, 2017). Alice's mother felt that TeViA was a good option for her and allowed time for Alice to pursue her creative interest (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Alice considered working at her own pace to be another advantage of a virtual academy. Socialization and loosing contact with previous friends were the disadvantages, even though this was not a big issue for Alice.

According to her reflection, Alice wished to attend a four-year college, to study forensic science. She did not see completing high school through a virtual academy as a hindrance, but an advantage. Completing work through a virtual academy required self-control and independence. Alice felt this will grab the attention of college entrance committees (personal communication, April 3, 2017).

Storm

Storm was diagnosed with Asperger's and, while attending traditional public school, became overwhelmed in a larger group of people. While his parents were researching home-schooling, Storm was involved in an accident resulting in a brain injury. When he was able to return to school, it was evident that home-schooling would not be a viable option any longer.

Due to the bullying that Storm experienced previously, his parents were still searching for an option to the brick-and-mortar school when the doctors recommended a virtual academy. Storm began by attending K12 Inc. in seventh grade and enrolled at TeViA as a freshman. Advantages that Storm experienced while attending a virtual academy included improved grades, learning at own pace, and ability to focus better (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Experienced disadvantages of attending a virtual academy for Storm were "tak[ing] socializing into your own hands [and] complicated to work out times to talk to the teachers" (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Storm enjoyed working with computers and coding. Storm wrote that his ultimate goal is game-design. He believed that attending a virtual academy will help him in reaching his future goals. Once he obtains his high school diploma, he will have met the requirements for a job at Amazon® and also continue his education at a four-year university (personal communication, April 4, 2017). He did not foresee any problems resulting from receiving a high school diploma from a virtual academy and entrance into a four-year university. He was already considered a student at the four-year university due to his enrollment in a dual enrollment course completed through TeViA (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Ella

Ella was relatively new to the virtual school experience. At the time of the interview, she had only been enrolled at TeViA for a little over a year (personal communication, April 14, 2017). She had always attended brick-and-mortar schools, even at the beginning of her high school career. The "nasty environment" (personal communication, April 14, 2017) was a major influence on her decision to leave a brick-and-mortar school for a virtual academy. Another factor was what she perceived as the lack of a proper education (personal communication, April

14, 2017; reflective journal, March, 2017). Even though her parents did not completely understand her desire to leave the public, brick-and-mortar school, they were supportive in researching other options (personal communication, April 14, 2017).

The main advantage of attending the virtual academy that Ella has experienced was more interaction with the teacher (personal communication, April 14, 2017). The TeViA teachers "actually sit down and suggest certain studying materials, ways to understand …" (personal communication, April 14, 2017).

One disadvantage in attending a virtual academy for Ella was the inability to participate in certain classes and activities that were available in her local public, brick-and-mortar school. Acting is an interest of Ella's. With TeViA, the opportunity to participate in school plays and drama was not available (personal communication, April 14, 2017). The lack of socialization is viewed to be a disadvantage for virtual academies (Sorensen, 2012). Ella did not view this as a problem. She stated "in the original public school I went to, there were people around, but there wasn't really any socialization" (personal communication, April 14, 2017). In TeViA, there were opportunities to socialize and communicate with other students through messaging (personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Ella was unsure of her plans after graduating from TeViA. She stated that she had "interest in being a computer engineer or an actress" (personal communication, April 14, 2017). Some of the courses she has taken at TeViA include a computer programming course and computer repair course which are beneficial in pursuing her computer engineer goal (personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Lucy

Lucy enrolled in TeViA after her freshman year of high school. This was her first year in a virtual academy. She lives in a farming community, about 110 miles from TeViA's headquarters. Among the reasons that Lucy chose a virtual academy were her "[B]est friend from middle school moving, …getting teased by other students …, re-occurring physical illness, ….excessive spiritual growth" (reflective journal, March, 2017). She also felt that a lot of time was wasted in the brick-and-mortar schools (personal communication, April 12, 2017). By searching online, her mother found TeViA as an alternative to the local public, brick-and-mortar school (personal communication, April 12, 2017). No other individuals helped Lucy with her decision to leave the brick-and-mortar school. She talked with the brick-and-mortar guidance counselor, but did not receive support or guidance as to why she wanted to leave (personal communication, April 12, 2017).

Completing her high school education through a virtual academy allowed Lucy to pursue her desire to travel (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Other advantages Lucy has experienced while at TeViA include having more time, opportunities to travel, work, less stress, and much happier (personal communication, April 12, 2017). One unexpected benefit in attending TeViA was "more one-on-one time with the teachers" (personal communication, April 12, 2017).

Even though other participants felt the lack of socialization was a disadvantage, Lucy did not share this sentiment. Lucy stated the lack of socialization is "not a disadvantage to me, because I just like to choose when I socialize" (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Lucy was able to socialize by her work, serving on church committees, and being involved with the

church youth group (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Lucy had not experienced any other disadvantages,

Lucy stated that her future plans include college to major in psychology in pursuit of becoming a family counselor (personal communication, April 12, 2017). She suspected techniques learned and practiced by attending TeViA, such as time-management and self-discipline, will be beneficial in post-secondary education (personal communication, April 12, 2017). "I think I'm at an advantage, because I already know how to pace myself" (personal communication, April 12, 2017).

Haley

Haley lives in a nice rural community approximately 300 miles from the base location of TeViA with her parents and brother. She felt that she had "too many distractions" (personal communication, April 1, 2017) while in the brick-and-mortar school. Haley's decision to complete high school through a virtual academy was influenced by options such as obtaining a full-time job, spending more time with her family, and focusing on school work (personal communication, April 1, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017).

Originally, Haley considered attending night school (personal communication, April 1, 2017). She discussed this option with the brick-and-mortar school counselor. The counselor gathered information on TeViA and provided this to Haley (personal communication, April 1, 2017). Haley did not know of anyone currently or previously enrolled in a virtual academy that could offer insight related to attending a virtual academy. At first, Haley's mother did not want her to attend the virtual academy but consented if that is what would make her happy (personal communication, April 1, 2017).

By attending the virtual academy, Haley has experienced more time to focus on assignments, work at her own pace, less distractions, and more time that allows for working a job (personal communication, April 1, 2017). Haley has experienced minimal disadvantages of attending a virtual academy. The only perceived disadvantages that Haley experienced was "doing all the work by yourself [and] self-teaching" (personal communication, April 1, 2017). Self-teaching is often characterized by having to wait for the teacher to answer a question or provide guidance rather than an immediate response. Even though students would not physically be working together to complete group assignments in a virtual class, access to other students in the same class was still available through learning groups, texting, messaging, and video conferencing (personal communication, April 1, 2017).

In her correspondence, Haley wrote that she plans on pursuing a four-degree in social work after completing two years at a local community college (personal communication, April 1, 2017). She did not foresee any obstacles when applying to colleges due to completing high school via virtual academy. She has begun the college application process and even expects to graduate high school early (interview notes, April 2017).

Jillian

Jillian left the brick-and-mortar school during second grade and entered K12 Inc. (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Her second grade teacher felt she could proceed to the third grade, but the required testing would take too much time and thus recommended virtual schooling (personal communication, April 4, 2017). She attended K12, Inc. through eighth grade (personal communication, April 4, 2017). During this time, Jillian's became more competitive in tennis. To continue at the competitive level of tennis, she would not be able to return to the brick-and-mortar school system after completing the eighth grade in K12 Inc.

Even though Jillian's second grade teacher was the original influence in the decision to leave the brick-and-mortar school, her father found TeViA. In researching for a virtual academy for which Jillian could complete her high school education, the fact that TeViA was accredited for NCAA was appealing (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Completing high school through a virtual academy that is accredited allowed Jillian to pursue her competitive sports and remain NCAA eligible to attend a Division I college. In Jillian's reflection, she stated that she plans to continue her education after high school by attending a regular brick-and-mortar four-year university, military academy, or possibly an online university (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Attending TeViA fulfilled Jillian's objective of accelerated progression in education and participating in competitive tennis (personal communication, April 4, 2017). She recognized only one disadvantage of attending a virtual academy. Jillian feels she would not be "able to really get the full experience" (personal communication, April 4, 2017) of high school. She considered the full experience to include presenting projects with and to classmates, as well as dissections in the science courses (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Bill

For Bill, attending a virtual high school academy was just a personal preference (personal communication, March 31, 2017). Bill enjoyed web design and art, which he has been able to pursue while attending TeViA (personal communication, March 31, 2017). The amount of busy work required was the only issue Bill had with attending a brick-and-mortar school. This did not impact his decision to attend a virtual academy; only the amount of busy work required (personal communication, March 31, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017). No one influenced Bill with his decision to attend TeViA. He suggested attending a virtual school to his parents and they

completed the research to find TeViA (personal communication, March 31, 2017; reflective journals, March 2017).

The advantages Bill experienced by attending a virtual high school academy included a better sleep schedule, time flexibility, and ability to work during the day (personal communication, March 31, 2017). With the flexibility in his daily schedule, he took more courses and read new material which resulted in gaining more knowledge (personal communication, March 31, 2017). Bill felt that in a brick-and-mortar school, his time was more restricted and did not allow him to grow in his knowledge (personal communication, March 31, 2017). Bill experienced a few disadvantages of attending a virtual academy. The two disadvantages he experienced were lack of clubs and lack of course opportunities (personal communication, March 31, 2017). In the virtual academy atmosphere, clubs are conducted through a forum discussion instead of actual face-to-face interaction (personal communication, March 31, 2017).

Bill wrote that he has plans to attend a four-year university after completing high school. Attending high school through a virtual academy was not a hindrance as he has already been accepted to colleges (personal communication, March 31, 2017). Through attending a virtual academy, Bill acquired good time management skills that will benefit him in college (reflective journal, March 2017).

Allyssa

Allyssa decided to attend TeViA after she considered multiple factors. Allyssa lives in a small rural location away from most brick-and-mortar schools and just completed her freshman year with TeViA (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Before attending TeviA, she attended a brick-and-mortar school half way through her seventh grade year and then

homeschooled through eighth grade (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Illness had been an issue for Allyssa which led to her being homeschooled. During her seventh grade year, she had a heart transplant that required excessive doctor's appointments and follow-up visits resulting in changing to homeschooling from a public brick-and-mortar school (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Also the part of school in which Allyssa enjoyed was learning, but did not feel this was a part of her experience at the brick-and-mortar school (personal communication, April 3, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017).

The advantages that Allyssa has experienced at TeViA were freedom, creativity, more time, and less attention to appearance (personal communication, April 3, 2017). With freedom, she was able "to decide when you do what work" (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Being creative with projects made the school work not as boring for Allyssa (personal communication, April 3, 2017).

Making friends in a virtual academy was a little more difficult, therefore this was a disadvantage for Allyssa (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Allyssa wrote, "Typing something to someone is a lot different from having a conversation with them" (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Attending a virtual academy can be lonely if not involved with activities outside of school (personal communication, April 3, 2017).

Allyssa expressed that she has plans on attending college after high school. She has not started the college application process but did not anticipate any problems. Dual enrollment courses are offered through TeViA. By completing dual enrollment courses and standardized college entrance exams such as the ACT and SAT, Allyssa did not foresee completing high school via an online academy as a hindrance for college acceptance (personal communication, April 3, 2017).

Mason

Mason and his family moved from another state to their current location. They were unable to move into what they consider to be a safe part of town or "of the highest class" (personal communication, March 30, 2017; reflective journal, March, 2017). Mason attended K12 Inc. virtual academy for seventh and eighth grade. After starting high school, his parent gave him the option to attend a brick-and-mortar school or TeViA (personal communication, March 30, 2017). No one else was influential in his decision to attend TeViA (personal communication, March 30, 2017; reflective journal, March, 2017).

Mason wrote that the primary advantage of virtual academies was that, "[Y]ou don't have to worry about noise or distraction, so you can focus in more on what you're learning" (personal communication, March 30, 2017). Focusing was difficult for Mason in the brick-and-mortar schools due to all of the talking (personal communication, March 30, 2017; reflective journal, March, 2017). The one advantage he didn't expect from attending the virtual academy was the genuine passion and helpfulness of the teachers (personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Even though not impossible, the difficulty of socializing was a disadvantage in a virtual academy (personal communication, March 30, 2017). This disadvantage was expected and socializing required work and planning (personal communication, March 30, 2017). TeViA did offer socializing events, but only a few (personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Like many of the other participants, Mason stated that he plans on attending a four-year university after graduation (personal communication, March 30, 2017). In researching and visiting different universities, Mason has not experienced any negative impact of attending a virtual academy related to applying to college (personal communication, March 30, 2017). He

felt his ACT scores will impact his college acceptance more than the grades obtained while attending a virtual high school (personal communication, March 30, 2017).

Zachary

Zachary was an underclassman in TeViA. He has only attended a public brick-and-mortar school during his elementary years. He began school by attending a private Christian school in a different state through second grade (personal communication, April 2, 2017). After moving, he attended a public brick-and-mortar school for third and fourth grade (personal communication, April 2, 2017). Before enrolling with TeViA, Zachary either attended a private school or was enrolled with ACE homebound program which was a "work-book based system" (personal communication, April 2, 2017). While he attended the brick-and-mortar school, he was bullied which was a factor in leaving the brick-and-mortar school (reflective journal, March 2017).

The ability to be more focused was an advantage of attending a virtual academy that Zachary did expect before enrolling (personal communication, April 2, 2017). More one-on-one time and a "more personal experience with the teachers" (personal communication, April 2, 2017) were unexpected advantages by Zachary. Other advantages he experienced include the ability to travel and work while still in school (personal communication, April 2, 2017).

The social aspect was the only disadvantage of the virtual academy that Zachary has experienced to this point (personal communication, April 2, 2017). Even though the difficulty of socializing was a disadvantage, it was not a major concern for Zachary (personal communication, April 2, 2017). His family did have reservations on his ability to socialize while attending TeViA. Socializing, though, was not a big concern for him one way or the other

(reflective journal, March 2017). There were opportunities for students to participate in clubs through "chats or Hangout [and] discussion boards" (personal communication, April 2, 2017).

Zachary reflected that he plans on attending college after high school and possibly pursuing counseling or psychology (personal communication, April 2, 2017). He wrote that he aspires to at least pursue a bachelor's degree if not higher (personal communication, April 2, 2017). Even though he has not started the college search and admission process as of yet, he did not anticipate any problems due to attending a virtual high school (personal communication, April 2, 2017).

Susie

Susie was an artistic senior at TeViA (personal communication, May 3, 2017). She was relatively new to virtual academies. She began attending TeViA half way through her junior year (personal communication, May 3, 2017). She was self-proclaimed to be socially awkward, introverted, and naturally quiet (personal communication, May 3, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017). The stress to perform, many hours behind a desk, the endless drama, and the attitude of many students at the brick-and-mortar school were considered to be influential factors of Susie's choice of enrolling in a virtual academy (personal communication, May 3, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017). The atmosphere in the brick-and-mortar school was competitive instead of focused on learning (reflective journal, March 2017). Before making the decision to enroll in TeViA, Susie discussed her situation at the brick-and-mortar school with her cousin from another state that was enrolled in a virtual academy (reflective journal, March 2017).

Susie recognized many advantages with attending an online public academy. Susie stated that the ability to ask questions, learning how to study, acquiring time-management skills, ability to sleep later, therefore not being sleepy in class and learning more material were the most

important benefits to virtual academies (interview with Susie, April 2017; reflective journal, March 2017). Susie wrote that she "did not need to be miserable for seven hours a day to get a decent education" (reflective journal, March 2017).

Along with advantages, there were also disadvantages to enrolling in a virtual academy instead of attending a brick-and-mortar school. One disadvantage that Susie experienced was isolation (personal communication, May 3, 2017). To offset complete isolation, TeViA students utilized virtual discussions. Another disadvantage Susie experienced was the limited number of fine arts courses offered. She wished to participate in a theater arts course and an art class to enhance her creative passion (personal communication, May 3, 2017). The last disadvantage that Susie experienced was participating in any special senior activities. Even though she was unaware of any specific senior activities offered at the local brick-and-mortar high school, she felt things such as senior awards and senior recognition programs would be some opportunities not offered in a virtual academy (personal communication, May 3, 2017).

Susie expressed a desire to pursue a four-year college degree after high school (personal communication, May 3, 2017). While still in high school, she was pursuing the option of attending a university that offered a complete online program (personal communication, May 3, 2017). With this being the case, Susie was confident that attending a virtual high school will only be beneficial in this pursuit (personal communication, May 3, 2017). The time-management learned and the extra personal time to improve her artistic abilities were advantages that will also help her in this endeavor (personal communication, May 3, 2017). Susie did not anticipate any problems in college acceptance due to attending a virtual high school (personal communication, May 3, 2017).

Results

The next section outlines significant codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and interview notes. Participant answers and notes were reviewed numerous times in order to identify the significant themes that were important in defining the substance of the phenomena. Answers to the research questions were the focus of the coding.

Participant reflective journals and information obtained from the semi-structured interviews provided in-depth, lived experiences for students that were motivated to enroll in a virtual high school academy. All of the semi-structured interviews with the participants were audio recorded. Notations were also made during each interview on a print-out of the Interview Questions (Appendix C) of key concepts, ideas, and short phrases that I felt were important or defining to the participants' answers. All interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were provided to the participant for verification of accuracy. No changes to transcriptions were required following the member checking.

Coding was completed on participants' reflective journals, interview transcriptions, and interview notes to identify common themes for providing answers to the research questions and determine the motivational factors for these participants for enrolling in a virtual academy. Common themes transpired during the data coding process.

Theme Development

Data collection to determine the emerging themes came from data collected in 12 reflective journals, 11 semi-structured interviews, and notations made during the semi-structured interviews. The reason for the difference in number of reflective journals and semi-structured

interviews was that one participant completed the reflective journal but did not respond to multiple requests for an interview after the originally scheduled interview had to be canceled.

Direct quotations from in vivo coding of specific phrases and words were documented for each participant. Waste of time, focus, bullying, time management and pace were some of the most repeated words and phrases throughout the reflective journals and interviews. Figure 1 shows the frequency of these repeated words and phrases.

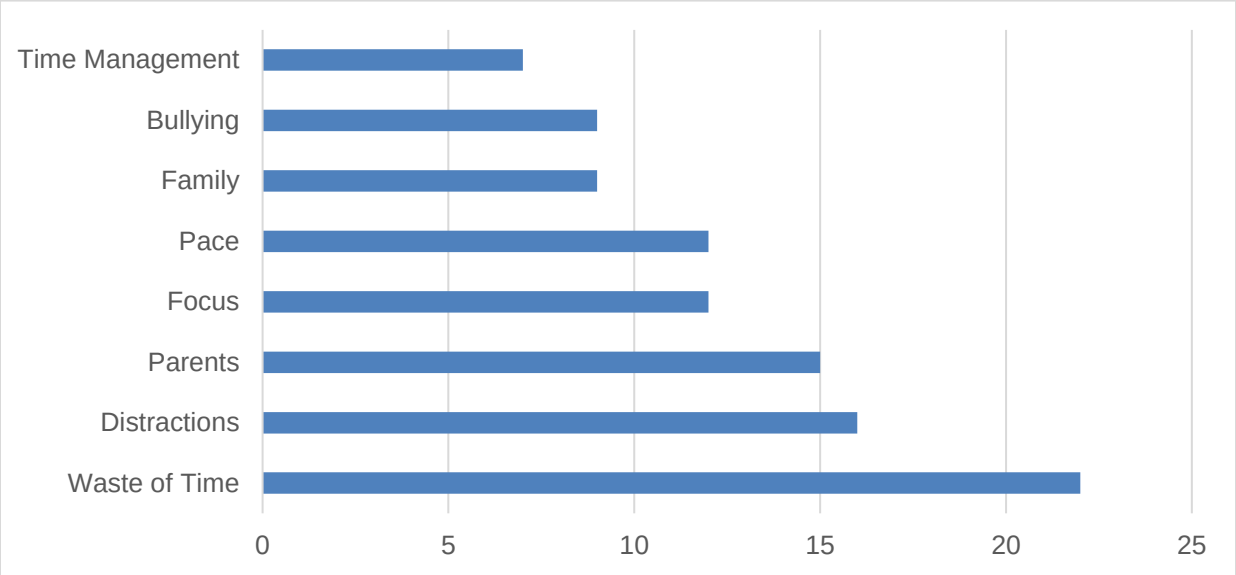

Figure 1. Analysis from in vivo coding that indicates frequency of repeated words and phrases.

Next, structural coding was completed on the reflective journals, interview transcripts, and interview notes. During the structural coding, a more in-depth review of participants' answers and the completed context of each stated word or phrase was completed. Similarities in participants' answers were also analyzed during the structural coding. Specific codes were developed during the structural coding that will be utilized in later development of categories. A Coding Frequency table was generated indicating how often an idea, thought, or term was stated. The Frequency table below presents a count of how often an idea, thought, or term was cited by a participant throughout the reflective journals, interviews, and interview notes.

Table 1

Coding Frequency of Cited Ideas and Thoughts

Code	Frequency
Time wasted (brick-and-mortar school)	22
Time to focus (virtual academy)	20
Distractions (brick-and-mortar schools)	16
Parents	15
Teaching Styles (brick-and-mortar school)	14
Limited opportunities (brick-and-mortar and virtual)	13
Continual communication with teachers	12
Maintain employment	12
Work at own pace	12
Family	11
More free time (virtual academy)	11
Mom	10
Travel	10
Bullying	9
Teachers no help (brick-and-mortar school)	9
Mean kids	8
Not influenced by guidance counselors	8
Online forum discussions	8

Personal progression (virtual)	8
Varied teaching methods (virtual)	8
Introvert/socially awkward	7
Learn time management (virtual)	7
Limited creativity (brick-and-mortar schools)	7
Socialization by texting	7
Learn more (virtual)	6
Class pace	5
Flexibility	5
Location	5
Bad environment (brick-and-mortar school)	4
Free will (virtual academy)	4
Get more help (virtual)	4
More real-life experiences	4
Socialization not forced	4
Attitude of students	3
Learning disabilities	3
One-on-one instruction (virtual)	3
Overwhelmed	3
Utilize specialized videos (virtual)	3
Annoying people	2
Discussed with teachers	2
Drama	2

Few friends	2
Safety issues	2
Sport activities	2
Develop good communication skills	1
Difficulties from accident	1
Issue with students	1
Lack of accommodations (brick-and-mortar school)	1
Less busy work (virtual academy)	1

After completing in vivo coding and structural coding, categories were formed by grouping the similar generated codes. Table 2 shows the categories that were created by a group of similar codes.

Table 2

Categories and Codes

Category	Codes
Action of students	Bullying
	Issue with students
	Annoying people
	Mean kids
	Safety Issues
	Attitudes of students

Brick-and-mortar atmosphere	Bad environment
	Drama
	Teaching styles
	Teachers no help
Influential people	Parents
	Mom
	Family
	Not influenced by guidance counselors
	Discussed with teachers
Influence of Socialization	Introvert/socially awkward
	Few friends
	Socialization not forced
	Socialization by texting
	Individual socialization difficulty
	Lack of clubs
Time Usage	Time wasted
	Distractions
	Time to focus (virtual)
	More free time (virtual)
	Class pace
	Free will (virtual)
	Less busy work (virtual)
Educational opportunities	More one-on-one (virtual)

	Personal progression
	Get more help (virtual)
	Learn time management (virtual)
	Learn more (virtual)
Actions of teachers	Utilize specialized videos (virtual)
	More one-on-one (virtual)
	Varied teaching methods
Educational Challenges	Distractions (brick-and-mortar)
	Limited opportunities
	Limited creativity (brick-and-mortar)
	Lack of accommodations (brick-and-mortar)
Personal situation	Maintain job
	Overwhelmed
	Difficulties with health
	Learning disabilities
	Sport activities
	Location
Virtual opportunities	Learn time management
	Work at own pace
	Travel
	More real-life experiences
	Personal progression
	Receive more help

Communication with teachers and students	Online forum discussions
	Develop good communication skills
	Continual communication with teachers

Once categories were created, themes were developed from the grouping of categories. The purpose of theme development "is to elicit meaning or the essence of the experience for the participant[s]" (Morse, 2008, p. 727). Table 3 identifies the derived themes and the corresponding categories.

Table 3

Themes with corresponding categories

Theme	Corresponding Categories
1. Student attitudes and atmosphere in a brick-and-mortar school	Action of students
	Brick-and-mortar atmosphere
2. Parents are the largest influence	Influential People
	Influence of socialization
3. Large amount of time wasted in a brick-and-mortar school	Time usage
	Educational opportunities
4. Brick-and-mortar classrooms not always conducive to learning	

	Actions of teachers
	Educational challenges
5. Ability to work at individual pace	
	Personal situations
	Virtual opportunities
	Communication with teachers and students

The development of themes provided a meaningful framework that allowed me to determine the motivating factors for students enrolling in a virtual academy.

Research Question Review

What are the motivating factors of secondary students for enrolling in a virtual academy? This central research question was designed to more clearly understand a student's perspective in choosing to attend a virtual academy. During analysis of the data and category development, it became apparent that participants experienced more than one factor or situation resulting in enrolling in a virtual academy. These situations were identified as codes, then grouped into categories. The four categories of which participants identified as an experience leading to enrolling in a virtual academy are (a) brick-and-mortar environment, (b) time usage, (c) action of students, and (d) personal situations. Table 3 below identifies which participants had an experience in these categories.

Table 4

Experiences of Participants

	Brick-and-mortar Environment	Time Usage	Action of Students	Personal Experiences

Alice	✓	✓	✓	
Storm	✓		✓	✓
Lindsey	✓			✓
Ella	✓			✓
Lucy	✓	✓	✓	✓
Haley	✓	✓		
Jillian	✓	✓		
Bill		✓		
Alyssa	✓		✓	✓
Mason	✓		✓	✓
Zachary	✓		✓	
Susie	✓	✓	✓	✓

Brick-and-mortar environment. The category of brick-and-mortar environment stemmed from phrases related to the participants' perceptions of the learning atmosphere and ability to learn in the brick-and-mortar school. Distractions, talking, teaching styles, and difficulty focusing are some of the repeated words and phrases that are included in the brick-and-mortar environment category.

Ella's perception of the teachers in the brick-and-mortar school she attended was discouraging. She stated that teachers in traditional school situations "didn't seem to care much … if the kids were getting enough proper education or not" (personal communication, April 14, 2017). Lindsey stated that "classmates were always focused on something else [other] than the

work (very distracting)" (reflective journal, March 1, 2017). Alyssa felt she "did not get a very good education" (personal communication, April 3, 2017) in the brick-and-mortar school she attended. The actions and behaviors of other students contributed to the perception of an unsatisfactory educational environment at a brick-and-mortar school. Mason found it difficult to complete school work in a brick-and-mortar classroom with the "element of talking and reverb (personal communication, March 30, 2017). Lindsey also found it difficult to process information from the teaching style of the brick-and-mortar teachers (reflective journal, March 14, 2017.) The unsatisfactory brick-and-mortar experiences for Jillian were not due to distractions, talking, or teaching styles, but the lack of ability in the current school system to allow promotion of two grade levels at one time.

Time usage. Repeated words of time wasted and class pace led to the category of time usage. The amount of wasted time in the brick-and-mortar school was an important factor for Lucy to enroll in a virtual academy. When Lucy answered the first interview question, she stated, "The most important thing was probably the amount of time I was spending in school, but not actually learning, not benefiting towards my education (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Wasted time was comprised of the time teachers spent on classroom management and discipline to the time waiting on students to complete classwork. Lucy felt with more efficient use of her time she world learn more material while enrolled in TeViA. Like some of the other participants, the time gained with enrolling in a virtual academy allowed Haley time to travel, to focus more on parts of curriculum that were difficult, spend more time with family, and work a full-time job (personal communication, April 1, 2017).

Actions of students. Category development revealed bullying to be a factor that contributed to students enrolling in a virtual academy. "Bullying," "teasing," and "mean people"

were the terms repeated which contributed to the creation of the bullying theme. Storm dealt with bullying at the brick-and-mortar school. Storm stated that he "started dealing with a lot of bullying there, and the teachers weren't helping … she even picked on me a lot" (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Zachary also experienced bullying and people being unpleasant which also contributed to his unsatisfactory educational experience (personal communication, April 2, 2017; reflective journal, March 2017).

Personal experiences. The fourth developed category indicated that a motivating factor for students to enroll in a virtual academy was personal experience. Personality of participants, health issues, location, employment, and learning disabilities were some of the phrases repeated in development of the personal experience category. Self-described personality traits of the participants motivated students to enrolling in TeViA. Being socially awkward, confused, and overwhelmed with the brick-and-mortar school, unhappy, being an introvert, and spiritual growth were some of the descriptions used by the participant to describe themselves prior to enrolling in a virtual academy. In her reflective journal, Susie described herself as "naturally quiet and introverted" (personal communication, May 3, 2017). While considering personal changes before enrolling in a virtual academy, Lucy identified "excessive spiritual growth" (reflective journal, February 2017) as a contributing factor of enrolling in a virtual academy.

Another personal situation was location, but only for two participants. Alyssa and Mason were the only participants that identified location as a motivating factor to enroll in a public virtual academy. Alyssa's issue with location was the proximity of her residence to the school, which was not very close (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Storm's situation of location was a safety issue. Storm felt that the brick-and-mortar school in which he planned to attend, was not very safe or in a safe area (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

In developing this category, some participants stated health issues that contributed to their decision of enrolling in a virtual academy. Storm was in an accident that resulted in brain injuries which contributed to difficulty in participating in the strict routine of a public brick-and-mortar school (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Sometime later, he was diagnosed with Asperger's, which compounded the situation and his dissatisfaction with the brick-and-mortar schools (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Alyssa began to experience health issues while attending a brick-and-mortar school which resulted in needing a heart transplant (personal communication, April 3, 2017). After the transplant, continual follow-up doctor appointments required her to miss a lot of school (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Lucy's medical issues were not as severe as Storm's and Alyssa's, but while attending a brick-and-mortar school she experienced re-occurring physical illness, "anything from the common cold to the flu" (reflective journal, February, 2017).

Research sub-question one was "How do students believe virtual classes will aid in obtaining the goal of graduation from high school?" Even though all participants planned on completing some type of post-secondary education after high school, a theme related to this research sub-question did not develop. At this time in their high school careers, only seven of the 11 interviewed participants had an idea of what type of future career or occupation they were going to pursue. Computer related careers, such as programming and web design, were of interest to three of the participants. A counseling related field was also of interest for the participants. Jillian was considering continuing her pro tennis career while attending a post-secondary college taking virtual classes.

None of the participants anticipated any problems with pursuing an undergraduate degree due to completing high school via a virtual academy. Jillian's father even completed research to

ensure attending TeViA would not violate NCAA rules or hinder her possible collegiate tennis career (personal communication, April 4, 2017). During his research, he determined TeViA was accredited and will not hurt any collegiate ambitions (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Alice felt that obtaining a high school diploma virtually will "grab their attention" (personal communication, April 3, 2017) when applying for college. Bill has already been accepted into a four-year university (personal communication, March 31, 2017). Working independently, time-management skills and study skills were repeated terms by the participants of how attending virtual academy will be of benefit for attending a post-secondary institution.

The second sub-question for this research was: "What is the perception of secondary students on how guidance counselors influenced their decision to enroll in a virtual academy?". Even though guidance counselors were influential to the decision of enrolling in a virtual academy for a couple participants, parents were the largest influence as determined from the derived themes. Parents, "mom", and family were the most repeated words when participants were asked about people that were influential. The categories that developed—influential people and influence of socialization—led to the theme of parents as the largest influence on a student's decision to enroll in a virtual academy.

Parental influence ranged from being supportive of the student's decision to actually finding TeViA as an alternative to the public brick-and-mortar school. For Storm, his parents made the decision that attending a virtual academy was necessary, especially after his accident (interview with Storm, April, 2017). In Storm's situation, teachers and doctors were also influential in the decision to enroll in a virtual academy (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Guidance counselors were of no influence in this situation.

For Ella, her parents were confused as to why she did not want to remain at the brick-and-mortar school but were supportive (personal communication April 14, 2017). Upon learning Lucy was extremely unhappy attending the brick-and-mortar school, her mother found TeViA while searching online (personal communication, April 14, 2017).

Lindsey stated that, "No one really influenced my decision" (reflective journal, March 14, 2017). She did, however, receive positive and negative reactions from both family and friends. It was ultimately her choice to enroll in a virtual academy (reflective journal, March 14, 2017).

According to data collected from the participants, guidance counselors were only influential for Haley. She contacted her guidance counselor to discuss available options to complete her high school education outside of the brick-and-mortar school. The guidance counselor gathered all of the information on TeViA for Haley (personal communication, April 1, 2017).

The third research sub-question was: "What do the students see as perceived advantages and disadvantages to the choice of enrolling in a virtual academy?" The theme that developed from the responses was the ability to work at an individual pace in a virtual academy. Numerous codes were used to develop the three categories for the theme that emerged for responses for sub-question three are reflected in Table 2 and Table 3. The two codes that developed this category were socialization difficulty and lack of clubs. No student felt these disadvantages were important enough to deter their decision to enroll in a virtual academy. Alice stated that a disadvantage "would be socialization … but, it was not really horrible" (personal communication, April 3, 2017). To overcome the socialization issue, Storm felt that students must "take socializing into your own hands and make sure you meet people" (personal

communication, April 4, 2017). Communication and socializing for a virtual academy are conducted via messaging, email, and video chats (personal communication with Ella, April 14, 2017; personal communication with Bill, March 31, 2017; personal communication with Allyssa, April 3, 2017). The other theme categories that emerged from the responses were personal situation, virtual opportunities, and communication with teachers and students.

Personal situations. Maintaining a job, being overwhelmed in a brick-and-mortar school, personal health, learning disabilities, sports, and location are codes that compose this category. Lucy, Haley, and Zachary all indicated that an advantage of attending a virtual academy was an option to work. Lucy felt that "working … [is] a great opportunity" (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Storm and Alyssa both felt a virtual academy was the best choice because of health situations. Due to a heart transplant, Alyssa had many follow-up appointments with her doctors resulting in missing many days at a brick-and-mortar school (personal communication, April 3, 2017). After being involved in a car wreck, Storm was diagnosed with a learning disability in which he felt the local brick-and-mortar school was not able to provide adequate services (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Attending a virtual academy allowed Jillian to pursue a tennis career (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Both Mason and Alyssa considered attending a virtual academy as an advantage due to their residence location. Mason felt that his local brick-and-mortar school was not in a safe location (personal communication, March 30, 2017). Alyssa, though, resided in a location that she felt was s "too far away" (personal communication, April 3, 2017) from her local brick-and-mortar school.

Virtual opportunities. Many of the participants experienced opportunities by attending a virtual academy instead of a brick-and-mortar school. Codes that developed in this category included: working at an individual pace, traveling, learning time management, scheduling

flexibility, and more real life experiences. Time, or like terms, were repeated when participants described the ability to learn material at their own pace. Jillian stated that completing her education through a virtual academy allowed for "personal progression" (personal communication, April 4, 2017). Having extra time to learn a specific concept was Mason's experience of learning at this own pace (personal communication, March 30, 2017). Just like Mason, Storm was also able to complete lessons and assignments at his own pace; thus he was learning more information and improve his grades (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Participants felt traveling, working, and community service events offered learning through more-real life experiences and not just from a classroom. Attending TeViA has given Lucy the opportunity to travel and to "meet new people every day" (personal communication, April 12, 2017). Susie mentioned that the free time afforded by virtual academies has given her an opportunity to enjoy a cruise, take weekend trips, and explore a large city (personal communication, May 3, 2017). Zachary also identified real life experiences as an advantage of attending a virtual academy. Zachary stated that "it [attending a virtual academy] … allowed me to travel and still be able to work" (personal communication, April 2, 2017). Bill appreciated the ability to have a more flexible schedule (personal communication, March 31, 2017; reflective journal, March 4, 2017).

Communication with teachers and students. A third category which emerged from the research data was the perceived advantage of communication with teachers and students in virtual academy. Even though difficulty in socialization was realized by students, communication was still possible through online forums. Alice, Lucy, Bill, Alyssa, and Zachary used the discussion boards from each class as a means to communicate with other students and teachers. Bill felt that using the discussion boards should be considered as socialization

(personal communication, March 31, 2017). By using online forms of communication, Bill had a "more personal experience with the teachers" (personal communication, March 30, 2017). Alice was able to "communicate with teachers and [the] principal at any time" (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Bill also found the continual interaction through the discussion boards helped to develop good communication skills (personal communication, March 31, 2017).

Summary

Chapter Four outlined the participants' lived experiences before and after enrolling in a public virtual high school. Through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews, the 12 participants shared perceptions of motivational factors, influential people, advantages and disadvantages of experiences from attending a public virtual academy. The analyzed data was reviewed in relation to the central research question and the three sub-questions. For the central research question, participant responses from reflective journals and semi-structured interviews related to situations and experiences prior to enrolling in a public virtual high school were analyzed for commonalities.

In vivo coding was performed on the reflective journal and semi-structured interview transcriptions to identify repeated terms by the individual participants. Structured coding was then completed to identify similar concepts among participant responses. The data gathered from participant reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and personal interview notes provided a plethora of information to identify codes, create categories, and develop themes which contributed substance in answering the research questions. The created themes were "ideas presented by participants during interviews, or conceptual topics developed by the researcher during a review of the data (Saldaña, 2009, p. 139).

The theoretical frameworks applied to this study were Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Owens & Valesky, 2011) and Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. In the next chapter, how the developed themes related to the theoretical frameworks of this study will be presented. Additionally, any implications of the study, delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research will be discussed.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to examine the motivational factors of secondary students to enroll in a public virtual high school academy. The investigation results of the study detailed student perception of benefits, influences, advantages, disadvantages, and situations as related to attending the public virtual high school academy. In Chapter Four, a brief summary was presented of the research findings and how the research questions were answered. The relationship of the research found to the literature will be reviewed in Chapter Five. Implications, delimitations, limitations, and recommendations for future research are outlined in this chapter as well.

Summary of the Findings

The central research question relates to the identification of factors that motivate students to enroll in a public virtual high school academy. The analyses of the data identified four themes related to the central research question. The four themes were (a) atmosphere and student attitudes in a brick-and-mortar school; (b) parents are the largest influence; (c) large amount of time wasted in a brick-and-mortar school; and (d) ability to work at an individual pace is the primary perceived advantage of a virtual academy. Along with the developed themes, analyses of the data indicated participants experienced more than one of the themes indicating multiple factors influenced the decisions for enrolling in a public virtual high school academy. Participants' lived experiences indicated that educational environment was a factor for all in deciding to enroll in a public virtual high school academy. All but one participant identified at least one other lived experience which contributed to the decision of enrolling in a public virtual

high school academy. One of the most noted experiences was a large amount of time wasted in a brick-and-mortar school.

Research sub-question one strived to determine if students' experiences in the public virtual high school academy will aid in completing high school and future goals. All students did not anticipate any problems with accomplishing all requirements necessary for graduating from high school. Continuing education in some form of post-secondary institution was a goal for all participants. For those students that have begun the process to attend a post-secondary institution, no obstacles were encountered. The fact of the public virtual high school academy went through the same accreditation process as the remaining schools in the home district gives substance to the diploma students will receive.

The secondary students' perception of guidance counselor influence was the focal point of research sub-question two. The participant responses of the reflective journals and semi-structured interviews indicate a variety of influential people, but guidance counselors did not emerge as a primary influence. From the data analysis, parents were the largest influential group to the students' decisions of enrolling in a public virtual high school academy.

Research sub-question three aimed to identify what the students perceive to be advantages and disadvantages from being enrolled in the public virtual high school academy. The experienced advantages outweigh the disadvantages that were identified by the participants' responses. From coding and data analyses, the theme of individualized pace was the primary student-perceived advantage of a virtual academy developed.

Discussion

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, along with Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory, composed the theoretical framework for this hermeneutical phenomenological study.

The use of these theories for the theoretical framework highlighted the students' perceptions and experiences related to the motivation factors for enrolling in a public virtual academy. The connection between the findings of the data collected from the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews with the literature previously reviewed are presented in the following discussion.

Empirical Literature Discussion

Motivation of adolescents was one focus of the literature review. The age of secondary students correlates to Piaget's Stage of Cognitive Development theory of the formal operation stage (Booth, 1983). Participants' learning time management and the ability to work at an individual pace were advantages enjoyed and traits exercised by attending a virtual academy. The participants' experiences substantiated Piaget's theory. One focus of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory was the influence of multiple elements in decision making. As seen by Table 1, participants identified a variety of ideas, thoughts, and terms which could be influential factors for deciding to enroll in a public virtual academy. The fact that all participants identified a goal for after-high school graduation supported Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination theory.

One aspect of Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory of Motivation is competence (Self-Determination Website), acting effectively or being successful. Table 1 identifies 12 instances in which participants identified having control to work at their own pace as a positive experience of a virtual academy. Students that performed on a pace that allowed them to reach a goal of completing an assignment demonstrated the characteristic of competence in Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory of Motivation.

Ryan and Deci (2000) write, "Self Determination Theory is specifically framed in terms of social and environmental factors that facilitate versus undermine intrinsic motivation" (p. 58).

The basis for the Self Determination Theory is founded in the positive and negative effects of social and cultural factors toward human tendencies (Sdt: Self-determination theory, n.d.). The connection between extrinsic and intrinsic forces contributes to an individual's motivation for personal needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Social and cultural factors for each participant were the extrinsic forces that contributed to the decision of enrolling in a virtual academy. Ryan and Deci identify extrinsic factors as a catalyst of the Self-determination theory. Numerous extrinsic factors were identified from the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. The factors included the participants' resident locations, athletic commitments, health issues, and negative actions of other in the brick and mortar schools.

Bauer and Erdogen (2007) write, "[I]t is important to remember that behavior is also strongly influenced by situational constraints" (p. 145). With this understanding, the situation and lived experiences contributed to the decisions made by each participant. "Self-efficacy is grounded in Bandura's Social Cognitive theory" (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014, p. 46). The participant decisions support Badura's Social Cognitive Theory regarding self-efficacy. Participants expressed motives as to why they will succeed and reach self-imposed goals. Completing assignments at an individual pace and the ability to have more real life experiences were two of the common factors noted by the participants.

Bauer and Erdogan (2007) posit: "The earliest studies of motivation involved an examination of individual needs" (p. 184). Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory addresses the fact that both extrinsic and intrinsic factors impact students' desire to reach a goal (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In participant responses, both extrinsic and intrinsic factors were identified that contributed to the student's decision to enroll in a public virtual academy for

obtaining the goal of high school graduation. The specific extrinsic and intrinsic factors of the participants were shown in the Chapter Four tables. The intrinsic factors identified by the participants included an introvert personality, a sense of being overwhelmed in a brick-and-mortar school, a desire to maintain a job, a learning disability, and the opportunity to work at an individual pace. Some of the extrinsic factors participants identified in motivating their decision to enroll in a public virtual academy were bullying in a brick-and-mortar school, resident location, and the learning environment of a brick school.

Theoretical Literature Discussion

Previous literature review of virtual academies originates from educators' points of view. Advantages of virtual academies, best pedagogy practices for virtual academies, and the success rates of virtual academies covers the majority of literature related to virtual academies. This study extended on previous literature by considering students' points of view. One aspect of Bandura's Cognitive Theory is learning through social interaction and observation. Through the participants' points of view, social interaction was not a high priority in an educational setting (Table 1). Necessary social interaction opportunities can be chosen by students in a virtual academy instead of being automatically included in the brick-and-mortar educational setting.

Environmental influences are an aspect of both Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory and Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory. The atmosphere and learning environment of the brick-and-mortar school were influential in many participants' decisions to enroll in a virtual academy. These environmental influences were also extrinsic factors that motivated participant decisions.

Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory has three components related to an individual's psychological needs: (1) competence, (2) relatedness, and (3) autonomy (Ryan and

Deci, 2000). Analyses of the participants' answers to the reflective journal prompts and semi-structured interview questions supported competence and autonomy by the participants' ability to complete educational assignments at an individual pace and nurtured inherent potential. The need of relatedness was not supported by the participants of this study. Even though the lack of social activities was a disadvantage of a virtual academy, this did not deter students from enrolling and was not an important issue.

Implications

Both students and school administrators can benefit from the information and analysis of the data in this study. If a high school student is searching for options in working toward high school graduation, the recollection from the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews could be of interest to the students. For public school officials, reviewing the data provided in this study offers insight to the students' perspective of a virtual academy as a possible viable option for students working toward a high school diploma. From analysis of the participants' lived experiences, five themes emerged that related to motivating factors for enrolling in a virtual academy: (1) student attitudes and atmosphere in a brick-and-mortar school; (2) parents are the largest influence; (3) large amount of time wasted in a brick-and-mortar school; (4) brick-and-mortar classroom not always conducive to learning; and (5) ability to work at an individual pace was the primary student perceived advantage of a virtual academy. The section below addresses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study in relation to the developed themes.

Theoretical Implications

Waste of time and distraction were the most repeated terms in the participants' reflective journals and semi-structured interviews (Figure 1). Students that were concerned with the

learning environment displayed ambition for successfully completing the goal of graduation. Therefore, the interpretation of the data from student reflective journals and the semi-structured interviews confirmed Bandura's Social Cognitive theory in that environmental factors influence decisions for self-efficacy. With the self-efficacy concept of the Social Cognitive theory, humans make decisions to perform behaviors in which they perceive success can be achieved and avoid less successful situations (Owens & Valesky, 2011). Multiple influences on human decisions are another aspect of Bandura's Social Cognitive theory proven by this study. As evidenced by Table 1 in Chapter Four, participants experienced multiple situations which influenced the decision to enroll in a public virtual academy.

The social learning aspect of Bandura's Cognitive Theory considers face-to-face social interaction due to the time frame for conception of this theory. Social learning in the 21st century takes on a new connotation with the introduction of social media platforms and the internet to everyone's daily life. Experiencing face-to-face social interactions is perceived as a disadvantage of virtual academies by educators and students, alike (Gold, 2012; Piccoli et al., 2001). Enrollment in a virtual academy limits a student's opportunities to observe and learn how others handle situations in a face-to-face setting. However, the virtual students do observe how interaction with others by communication in a virtual setting should be conducted. Data interpretations indicate both social and cultural factors influence intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, motivational factors for the participants which confirmed Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination theory. Through their responses, students expressed a lack of time control at the brick-and-mortar schools, and increased control of time with attending a public virtual academy. Competence, relatedness, and autonomy are the three psychological needs identified in Ryan and Deci's Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Empirical Implications

Differentiated instruction is an education philosophy in which teachers provide varying learning for students in attempt to reach all students (Posner & Rudnitsky, 2006). According to participant data, differentiated instruction was not successful in a brick-and-mortar school, but it was a successful aspect of a virtual academy. Participants identified varied teaching styles, more one-on-one communication with teachers, and less busy work as positive experiences in attending virtual academies, supporting the implication of successful differentiated instruction in virtual academies. As an administrator in a brick-and-mortar public high school, the researcher agrees that differentiated instruction is important to reach as many students as possible. In dealing with students, it has also become more apparent that differentiated learning environments are necessary for student success. A virtual academy is a good option.

Two negatives in the brick-and-mortar school that influenced some of the participants to attend the public virtual academy were the drama and bullying between students. As an administrator, the researcher observes bullying through social media as something that is dealt with on a weekly basis. One factor that helped to promote virtual academies, but has also been a leading factor in bullying, is technology. It is possible students are not learning to handle situations in a face-to-face setting. Maybe the emphasis at an early age has been placed on how to utilize technology instead of face-to-face social interaction. If parents and educators make a point to promote positive communication, face to face and via social media, bullying could decrease along with the desire to not be involved in face-to-face social interaction.

Practical Implications

This study has practical implications for both high school students and school administrators. For a student who may be considering enrolling in a virtual academy, knowing

situations of other students who chose virtual academies over brick-and-mortar schools can be of help in making a decision. Understanding the reasons students decide to withdraw from a brick-and-mortar school can aid administrators when contemplating options to improve graduation and attendance rates. Reviewing students' perceptions toward brick-and-mortar school and public virtual academies provided insight to administrators in helping students to succeed.

Students can benefit from this study by associating their individual situations with the situations of the participants. The themes identified in this study could help other students determine if a public virtual academy is a viable option, or even necessary, to reach graduation. Also, recognizing student-perceived advantages and disadvantages provides additional information to make a more informed decision in relation to public virtual academies.

Students enrolled in a public virtual academy have the opportunity to participate in real life experiences such as traveling and employment. Also, students enrolled in a public virtual academy utilize their time to participate in hobbies. For students, knowing the real-life experiences and hobbies of the participants can offer practical implications when considering enrolling in a public virtual academy.

Flexibility in a virtual academy, large amount of wasted time at a brick-and-mortar school and the ability to work on assignments at an individual pace were identified by participants as motivating factors for enrolling in a virtual academy. From this information, it could be considered that a virtual academy offers a differentiated learning environment for students struggling in a normal setting or have an uncommon home life or schedules. Also, public school districts continually face accreditation standards mandated by the state and federal governments. Not considering or reviewing every option is irresponsible. Administrators should not overlook a virtual academy as an educational option in the public school district. The

students' perspective will aid in administration making an informed decision on what is best for the school district.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations for this study were used to focus directly on the students' motivational factors for attending a public virtual academy. Boundaries were defined for this study by focusing on students' perspectives of individually lived experiences attending a brick-and-mortar school and public virtual academy. The participant sample consisted of high schools students (grades nine through 12) enrolled in the same public virtual academy. The scope of this study focused on secondary students, therefore, only high school students were asked to participate. One data collection strategy was semi-structured interviews which contributed to a distance restriction. All student participants lived within a 300-mile radius of the public virtual academy headquarters which aided in a reduction of time to complete interviews and restriction by travel costs.

One limitation is the initial creation of the sample population. The principal of the virtual academy provided email addresses for students. Email was the only source of access of initial contact to recruit participants. The number of responses, or lack of, could have been a concern for this phenomenological study. After participants agreed to be part of the study, not all continued or completed the data gathering process. In order to reduce the possibility of these limitations hindering the continuation of this study a large sampling audience was contacted to help ensure data was collected from a sufficient number of participants for a phenomenological study.

Truthfulness of participant answers was another limitation for this study. Triangulation was achieved by asking participants to provide responses in two different formats, reviewing

interviewer notations, and a participant verification of semi-structured interviews. These three methods strengthened the trustworthiness of responses.

Recommendations for Future Research

A hermeneutical, phenomenological study was conducted to determine the motivating factors for students to attend a virtual academy. One recommendation would be to conduct a case study. Case studies provide a more in-depth analysis, widening the volume of research surrounding the motivations and outcomes of virtual academies verses a traditional brick-and-mortar school.

Data for this study was gathered through reflective journals and semi-structured interviews. A different data collection tool could also be considered. Distribution of a survey is a collection tool that could be used in a study with more participants. This study confined research to students in a southeast state attending one, specific virtual academy. Location demographics and state high school graduation requirements contribute to student situations and educational experiences. These contributing factors may influence a student's motivation to attend a public virtual academy. Including more virtual academies in multiple states could allow for future research to have a larger and more diverse sampling population.

This study sought to identify the phenomenon of what motivates students to complete high school in a public virtual academy. New student perceptions, experiences, and situations could be revealed by changing the study type, data collection methods, or the population sample.

Summary

The focus of this study was to examine the phenomenon of secondary students deciding to enroll in a public virtual academy. Through evaluating student experiences and perceptions, this research study sought to identify the motivational factors which influenced the students'

decisions to enroll in a public virtual academy to complete high school. The increase of technology used in education, the one-to-one initiative, and an increase of a virtual course graduation requirements obligate public school administrators to revisit the possibility that the traditional classroom is no longer sufficient.

Many could hypothesize that health, sports, or religious preferences are motivational factors for high school students. These were found to be contributing factors, but not the primary motivational factor. Three themes developed indicating students wanted a different educational experience: (a) student attitudes and atmosphere in a brick-and-mortar school; (b) large amount of time wasted in a brick-and-mortar school; and (c) brick-and-mortar classroom environment not always conducive to learning. When specifically asked what contributed to her enrolling in a virtual academy, Alice stated that the brick-and-mortar school puts "limits to what you can do" (personal communication, April 3, 2017). Ella's perception of the brick-and-mortar school was that the environment was bad and that "everybody just did not care" (personal communication, April 14, 2017). For Storm, the bullying he experienced, the lack of action by the teacher, and his perception of the teacher making fun of him contributed to his decision to enroll in a public virtual academy (personal communication, April 4, 2017).

Public education administrators can use the findings in this study to assess adding a virtual option for instruction. The findings may also expose student perceived situations that need to be addressed. If the current school environment is the primary factor for students leaving the traditional classroom, administrators must then look within their own schools to remedy internal problems.

The findings of this study also revealed which individuals have a large influence on secondary students' educational decisions. One theme that developed from data analysis was

that parents were the primary influence for participants. Guidance counselors and friends contributed very little in influencing students to enroll in a virtual academy. The lack of socialization from peer interaction did not deter these students in their decisions.

The primary goal for all participants was to receive a quality high school education with the fewest distraction and minimal interference as possible. Missing the other aspects normally associated with a traditional high school setting, such as socialization and planned school activities, were not major concerns. A public virtual academy could be a viable option for many of today's secondary students. The student perceptions presented and the themes developed in this study will help students and administrators make decisions regarding public virtual academies.

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APPENDIX A– RECRUITMENT LETTER

Date: September 17, 2016

Student Name
Student Address Line 1
Student Address Line 2
Student Address Line 3

Dear Student:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to create a reflective journal entry, partake in a face-to-face interview, and be observed while working in a virtual class. It should take approximately a total of three hours for you to complete the procedure listed. Your parent or guardian will also be asked to participate by creating a reflective journal entry and partake in a face-to-face interview. Your participation, and your parent's or guardian's participation, will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required.

To participate, please contact me by email at jhuffman2@liberty.edu. I will then forward you an informed consent document that contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $20.00 gift card. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jan M. Huffman
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX B – CONSENT FORM

Virtual Academies used for Completing Secondary Education
Jan Huffman
Liberty University
Department of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of why students, parents, and counselors decide to utilize virtual academies to complete secondary education. You were selected as a possible participant because of your enrollment in the school's virtual academy, the enrollment of your dependent in a virtual academy, or being a counselor that enrolls students in virtual programs. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Jan Huffman, Doctoral Candidate of the Liberty University Department of Education.

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of why secondary students choose to utilize virtual academies to complete secondary education.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things:

- Complete a reflective journal regarding the decision to enroll in a virtual academy
- To participate in a personal interview that is recorded
- Allow for observation of time spent "attending" the virtual courses
- Review transcripts and information for accuracy

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study

This study has minimal risk. The risks are not more than those encountered in everyday life. If disclosure of information regarding child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others is made, these will be reported due to mandatory reporting requirements.

Compensation:

Each participant of this study will receive a $20 gift card. In order to receive compensation, the participant must complete the required reflective journal, participate in a personal interview, be observed participating in a virtual class, and review transcripts and information.

Instead of the gift card, school counselor participants will receive in-service credit. The amount of in-service credit will be determined by the regulations and policies of each individual school district in which the counselor is employed.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be store securely and only researchers will have access to the records. Tape recordings will be stored in a lock box. Computer data will be stored in password protected files that only the researcher can access.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or the virtual academy you are currently enrolled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Jan Huffman. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at jhuffman2@liberty.edu or 423-341-2099. The chair of the dissertation committee, Dr. Phyllis Booth, can also be contacted with any question at pbooth@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have reviewed answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature	Date
Signature of parent or guardian *(If participant is a minor)*	Date
Signature of Researcher	Date

APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below are the open-ended interview questions that will be asked of each student participant:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Please describe your life situations that contributed to enrolling in a virtual academy.
2. Please describe your goals and desires not related to education or school that contributed to enrolling in a virtual academy.
3. If you faced any challenges while attending a brick-and-mortar school, please describe these and the influence on your decision to enroll in a virtual academy.
4. Did your parents influence or motivate your decision to enroll in a virtual academy? If so, how?
5. Did guidance counselors assist in your decision to enroll in a virtual academy? If so, how?
6. Did other individuals, besides your parents and guidance counselors influence your decision to enroll in a virtual academy? If so, how?
7. Do you think attending a virtual academy will help you achieve your goals in high school and after? If so, please describe why you think this way.
8. What do you consider to be the advantages you have experienced by enrolling in a virtual academy as opposed to attending a brick-and-mortar school and did you expect to experience these advantages?
9. What do you consider to be the disadvantages you have experienced by enrolling in a virtual academy as opposed to attending a brick-and-mortar school and did you expect to experience these disadvantages?

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

January 26, 2017

Jan Huffman
IRB Approval 2712.012617: A Phenomenological Study of What Motivates Secondary Students to Enroll in Virtual Academies

Dear Jan Huffman,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

LIBERTY
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Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971