

EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF
ONLINE EDUCATION

By

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Dedication

With sincere gratitude, I dedicate this work to my husband, Ché Seibold. I am fortunate to have a life partner who is supportive in every way. By his side, the hard times are easier to shoulder and the good times have added enchantment.

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Chapter I - Introduction to the Study

Online education is a growing phenomenon within a highly competitive educational market. Due to advances in technology, more and more colleges and universities offer online classes, and advertisements for online learning can be found in every medium (Berg, 2002; Bernado, 2004; Campbell & Swift, 2006; Chancy, 2002; McIsaac, 1996; Rice, 2003; Shur, 2003; Ticker, 2001). With this increased demand and exposure, institutions of higher education have a window of opportunity to mold online learning into a reputable form of educational delivery. To do so, it is important for higher education professionals to be aware of more than just the number of students they can graduate or the desire of those students for online offerings. They must also be aware of the perceptions and needs of the employers to whom students will offer their services upon graduation (Adams and DeFleur, 2006; Chaney 2002; Levin, 1997; Russell, 2004; USU, 1999).

Problem Statement

The increased demand for online education is evident when looking at the boost in the number of online offerings at universities across the United States. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001), during the school year 2000-2001, 55% of all 2-year and 4-year college-level, credit-granting institutions offered online distance learning courses. According to research, these courses provide a convenient option for busy adults to finish or further their education and the opportunity for universities to enlarge their student base without expanding the physical walls of the campus (Bernado, 2004; Campbell & Swift, 2006; Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005; Mash, et al, 2005; Neil, 2004; Patten, 2002).

However, online education may not represent a credible option for securing a job in the employment market (Adams and DeFleur, 2006; Chaney 2002; Levin, 1997; Russell, 2004; USU, 1999).

When viewed from a sociological standpoint, online education may not be on the same echelon as traditional forms of educational delivery. There may be certain human, social realities that prevent online education from becoming widely accepted in American society. Early sociologists theorized that following the Industrial Revolution, education became a commodity powerful enough to secure prestige in Western culture (Lenski, 1966; Mills & Hans, 1953; Weber, 1947). Occupations and the credentials to obtain them began to play a big part in the division of social status. Because social standing often determines the goods and services available, the ability to elevate social status becomes very important to one's livelihood.

Studies show mixed results concerning the perceived credibility of online education in the employment market (Adams and DeFleur, 2006; Chaney 2002; Levin, 1997; Russell, 2004; USU, 1999). In a study conducted by Adams and DeFleur (2006), employers were asked to choose between two hypothetical job applicants—one with an online degree and one with a traditional degree. The candidate with the traditional degree was chosen by 96% of the respondents. Even when only half of the applicant's coursework was completed online, the traditional degree was still selected by 75% of respondents. In an earlier study conducted by the same two researchers, it was found that only 7% of public higher education deans and directors were willing to admit graduate students with online degrees, and only 11% of private higher education deans and directors were willing to do so (Adams & DeFleur, 2006).

Richard Bayer chief operating officer of the Five O'clock Club, a national career

counseling and job placement firm based in New York, “advises clients not to mention it if they earned degrees online, because such degrees are often seen as less prestigious” (Russell, 2004, para. 3). In a 2002 dissertation study conducted at Indiana State University, results show that although online learning may be beneficial to students and universities, employers may not see online education as equal to traditional modes of education (Chaney, 2002).

What needs to be more clearly understood are employers’ actual perceptions of online education and how these perceptions are formed. If employers’ perceptions help drive the employment market, employability has a tremendous effect on the future of online education. If employers do not see online education as a legitimate form of educational delivery, now is the time for evaluation and correction.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore employers’ perceptions of online education and to identify the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions.

Research Questions

1. How do employers perceive the quality of online coursework and/or degrees in comparison to more traditional education?
2. What differences do employers perceive between non-profit institutions that offer online coursework and for-profit institutions that offer online coursework?
3. What concerns do employers have about the educational path of their potential employees, and how do these concerns impact the hiring process?
4. What effect has the advertisement of online education and concrete

exposure to online education (personal or through employee contact) had on employers' perceptions of online education?

Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective used for this study was constructionism. It was selected because it embraces the view that individuals create their own reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), humans construct their own realities through interaction with the world around them. These realities sometimes have little to do with empirical evidence or objectivism, he explains. Instead, they are subjective and separated from the natural world through social constructionism.

Social construction, or constructivists philosophy, is built on the thesis of ontological reality, which holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on the worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical or sense data about the world. Hence, two people can live in the same empirical world, even though one's world is haunted by demons, and the other's, by subatomic particles. (Patton, 2002, p. 97)

Although social constructionism is not necessarily based on physical evidence, the realities that are created come to represent absolute truth to those who believe in them (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). They become as much a part of the real world as a river or a mountain.

Crotty (2003) demonstrates the concept of constructionism when he describes the many realities that represent trees. He states that although trees are physical entities, they represent different truths to different people. For example, he writes, "a tree is likely to bear quite different connotations in a logging town, an artists' settlement and a treeless slum" (p.

43). The individuals or groups in these three settings are compelled to construct the meaning that best fits into their world. If, following their original construction, their interactions with trees change, their reality is likely to change as well.

Through the use of interviews, the researcher uncovered the realities held by employers about online education. She discovered how these realities were formed and how they impact the employment environment in which they exist.

Analytical Lens

Mere Exposure Theory was used as a lens when analyzing the themes that emerge from the information about exposure to online education. It has been theorized that being exposed to a certain stimulus repeatedly can create a sense of acceptance within people's minds (ChangingMinds.org). The theory is called Mere Exposure. Baker (1999) explains that, "Mere Exposure is commonly believed to evoke a basic habituation response that renders a stimulus less threatening and hence, more approachable" (p. 32). The theory, first proposed by Robert Zajonc in the late 1960s, has since been the subject of much research in classical conditioning (Baker). It is thought that the underlying mechanism of merely exposing one to a stimulus produces an uncertainty reduction in subjects and creates a sense of acceptance, allowing subjects to become attached to the stimulus (Lee, 1994).

The intent for using Mere Exposure Theory as a lens was to discover the usefulness of the theory for studying employers' perceptions of online education and to expand the research within the area of exposure. Additional information about Mere Exposure Theory is located in the Chapter III, the Methodology section of this study. The analysis of the theory as a lens for the study of employers' perceptions of online education is located in Chapter IV, the Analysis section of this study.

Significance of Study

This study was intended to help institutions of higher education assess the level of acceptance online education has achieved in the employment market, define online credentials more clearly, and design and advertise better online education programs. The study contributes to the research within higher education by helping to identify employers' perceptions of online education and by exploring the impact exposure marketing has had on the formation of these perceptions. It helps measure the level of acceptance online education has achieved in the marketplace by assessing the value employers place on online education. It helps define online credentials by identifying their place within the broader arena of education.

If a degree is, in effect, a key bargaining tool in both financial viability and status (Lanski, 1966; Mills & Hans, 1953; Weber, 1947), it is important to understand whether some degrees have greater bargaining power in today's employment market simply because of the way(s) in which they are delivered. This study contributes to the understanding of these practical issues by offering insight into employers' perception of online education credentials and helping to identify changes in the perceptions of online education due to increased exposure in the employment market.

Chapter II – Literature Review

Introduction and Arrangement

Distance education in the United States has been around since the early 1800s, and the discussion of its legitimacy has been around for just as long. Supporters say distance education is a much needed form of educational delivery, offering access to higher education for those who would traditionally not have it. They claim it has aided in the expansion of higher education and has forced the development of new delivery methods that are innovative and paradigm shifting (Bernado, 2004; Campbell & Swift, 2006; Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005; Mash, et al, 2005; Neil, 2004; Patten, 2002). With a rise in the use of technology as a means of educational delivery, opportunities to solidify these supportive claims are abundant.

Much literature has been published on the history of distance education as well as its benefits and limitations. However, not much has been written about employers' perceptions of distance education, including online education. This review of the existing literature begins by defining distance education and demonstrating its increased use within higher education institutions, highlighting distance education's metamorphosis into online education. It then provides viewpoints on both the positive and negative aspects of distance education, including online education. Finally, it presents past sociological literature on the impact of educational attainment on employability and showcases literature on employers' perceptions of distance and online education.

History of Distance Education

Distance education is defined as the separation of teacher and learner with some form of educational media used to unite the two during the learning process (Mash, Marais, Van Der Walt, Van Deventer, Steyn, & Labadarios, 2005). Although it may seem like distance education began with the onset of the electronic age, its first occurrence was much earlier. It started in the United States as early as the 1800s when the University of Chicago introduced the first major correspondence program based on the fact that the teacher and learner were in different locations (McIsaac, 1996).

Anna Ticknor created a home study program in 1873 designed to provide educational opportunities for women of all classes of society. Later, in 1883, Cornell University established a Correspondence University. Unfortunately, it never officially opened for business (Nasseh). The first legally recognized correspondence course operated from 1883 to 1891 and was founded by the Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts. The college was authorized by the state of New York to provide degree programs to students who attended its summer institute or who took correspondence during the regular school year (Nasseh). By World War I, over 12 universities had correspondence instruction programs, including Pennsylvania State College, Baylor University, and the University of Wisconsin (Berg, 2002).

During the period between 1910 and 1920, visual instruction methods, including lantern slides and motion pictures were added to the curriculum (Nasseh). "In the years between the World Wars (1918-1946), the federal government granted radio broadcasting licenses to 202 colleges, universities, and school boards" (Nasseh, para. 7). This caused the use of radio as a method of educational delivery to gain strength, particularly between the years of 1925 to 1935. "Schools of the Air" were established at the University of Wisconsin,

Kansas University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Minnesota. These schools offered a combination of radio broadcasts and correspondence by mail. By 1940 the use of radio began to diminish because it failed to attract significant enrollments (Nasseh).

Television began to be used as a form of distance education delivery in 1953 at the University of Iowa. The use of this new delivery mechanism expanded during the 1960 and sparked interest in the exploration of other technologies (Berg, 2002). A true turning point in the delivery of distance education came from the British Open University in the United Kingdom. In 1969, British Open University began to take advantage of the use of various technologies to supplement print based instruction (McIsaac, 1996). The United States quickly followed suit in 1971 when the first United States Open University was established in New York State's Empire State College (Nasseh). Although open universities were primarily print based institutions, they paved the way for the reconception of distance education (McIssac).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, cable and satellite television became a popular means of delivering instruction to distance education students (Nasseh). In 1986, Charles Wedemyer, an innovative educator at the University of Wisconsin, began using media in correspondence study and experimenting with new technologies that would provide more effective distance education to his students (McIsaac, 1996). His and other innovative uses of technology impacted the growth of distance education programs across the United States, setting a new standard for the delivery methods (Berg, 2002; McIsaac, 1996; Nasseh).

Today, it might be said that "distance education is a form of study whose time has come" (Ticker, 2001, p. 165). The world is embracing it because it provides a means of acquiring a degree that is flexible, which appeals to students who do not have the ability to

attend classes on campus due to scheduling conflicts, family, or work. It also offers educational opportunities to those in remote locations who do not have access to conventional forms of educational delivery (Ticker, 2001). Perhaps the principal reason for the increased popularity of distance education programs is the addition of online delivery.

The virtual classroom more closely mimics that of the traditional classroom, with instant feedback from instructors and more interaction between students. Throughout the early years of distance education, this was not always the case. Mail was the dominate delivery system for correspondence study. This mode of delivery severely limited interaction between instructor and student (Nasseh). However, those offering such programs soon began to look to the addition of supplemental materials that would help distance education become more like traditional education. The results paved the way for online delivery.

Increased Use of Online Education Methods

Demographic changes in the United States are having a tremendous affect on the composition of the college and university campus. Students of various races, national origin, and socioeconomic backgrounds are making their way to higher education in larger numbers than every before (Shur, 2003). The changes have also brought more adult learners to higher education:

Serving the needs of adult students in higher education has become an important priority for higher education professionals over the past twenty years. The average student no longer fits the standard definition for a college student: eighteen to twenty-two years old, directly enrolled from higher school, living on campus or in the Greek community, and enrolled full-time. (Rice, 2003, p. 53)

These adult learners are demanding a new approach for achieving their educational goals.

Changes in the use of technology as a means of educational delivery are also having an impact on the student body and the services provided to them. Increasingly, higher education is relying on technology to meet educational needs. Technology is being used in administrative, academic, and student services areas (Changing landscape, 2000). Perhaps the most visible area within higher education being influenced by the use of technology is recruitment.

The battle to attract students is fostering the increased use of technology in the delivery of online education programs (Newman, 2001). In 1987, only 10 states were promoting distance education. "A year later that number had grown to two-thirds of the states, and by 1989, virtually all states were involved in distance learning programs" (McIsaac, 1996, United States section, para. 1). A survey given by Dun & Bradstreet Market Data Retrieval Division's College Technology Review in the year 2000 revealed that 72% of the 1,028 colleges were offering distance learning programs, 34% of them offering complete degrees (Berg, 2002).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001), during the school year 2000-2001, 55% of all 2-year and 4-year college-level, credit-granting institutions offered distance learning courses. The Center reported that 48% of all institutions in the United States offered undergraduate courses through distance education, and 22% offered graduate courses.

Potashnik (1998) predicted an increase in educational competition and alliances in a global market. He said the greater competition in higher education would force institutions to offer programs on a global level, increasing the use of online education. Online education, he said, makes it possible for institutions to build partnership alliances that were

not possible in the past. Institutions are collaborating with businesses, foreign alliances, and international organizations to provide fast, efficient, and cost effective distance education. These predictions are being played out today and increasing the likelihood that online education will continue to grow.

Today, the growth of online education is evident even in public media. On *Talk of the Nation*, a National Public Radio program, Neal Conan (2006) reported that 1,500,000 students are enrolled in online education. He further reported that 8% of all college and university enrollments are online, making it the fastest growing segment within higher education. His guest speaker, Peter Stokes, Executive Vice President of Eduventures, explained that the overall growth within higher education is currently around 2%. However, recent growth in online education far exceeds that rate at 15%.

Criticism of Online Education

Despite the increase in the use of online education, it is not without its opponents. Critics of distance education complain that distance courses preclude interaction between student and instructor and student and student (Berg, 2002). For example, accounting chairpersons have reported opposition to acquiring a degree through distance learning because they believe that the experience gained from being on a college campus cannot be duplicated via distance education (Potashnik, 1998).

The element of online education that may be having the most negative impact on the acceptance of the distance education is the ease in which one can purchase a fake degree.

The Internet has given rise to a new type of graduate school; the diploma mill. It's fairly easy to create a fake university that looks Ivy League by spending a little

money on Web graphics and a lot of money on search engine optimization. (Phillips, 2004, Online section, para. 1)

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary online, diploma mills are "unregulated institution of higher education granting degrees with few or no academic requirements" (Merriam-Webster Online). These types of operations might be making it difficult for legitimate distance education institutions to establish credibility.

In 2001, it was estimated that sales of fake degrees reached the \$200 million mark worldwide. One of the largest diploma mills internationally is called the University Degree Program. Since its establishment, it is estimated that the owners have made \$400 million selling fake degrees to Americans and Canadians. Columbia State University is another prominent offender. It is located in California, but during its operation, claimed to be located in Louisiana. The owners of the operation sold over \$10 million worth of fake degrees during its last four years in business (Ezell & Bear, 2005).

Some diploma mills advertise accreditation as a way to establish legitimacy. Unfortunately, not all accreditation agencies are creditable. Phillips (2004), reports that most fake distance education institutions advertise 100% accreditation. The problem is, the accreditation agencies they advertise are bogus, often created by those running the school.

When unable to receive accreditation from a regional accreditation body, Maxine Asher, founder of American World University, established her own accreditation agency called World Association of Universities and Colleges. Unfortunately for her customers, the accreditation she offered them did not mean anything in the real world of higher education (Smallwood, 2004).

With all of the setting up of fake accreditation agencies and the selling of phony

degrees online, it is hard to believe that selling degrees is only illegal in Oregon, New Jersey, Indiana, Illinois, and North Dakota. Even in those states, if an institution is caught granting a fake degree, it is considered a misdemeanor and is only punishable by a \$350 to \$2,500 fine (Andrews, 2005). Fortunately, the United States Department of Education has implemented measures to help consumers discern reputable educational institutions from non-reputable ones. The agency has compiled a list of all institutions in the United States that are accredited by legitimate accreditation bodies. Sally L. Stroup, assistant secretary for postsecondary education points out that, although the list will not identify which institutions are legitimate and which are not, it is a good guide (Carnevale, 2004).

Commercialization within Higher Education is another aspect that is having a negative impact on online education. Although commercialization seems to be on the increase, the fear of commercialization in education is not new. In the Yale Report of 1828, a return to the classics was promoted as a result of the public pushing universities to start concentrating on applied curriculum (Berg, 2002). Today, for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix are doing just what the writers of the Yale Report were trying to stop—teaching toward the job. Unlike diploma mills, these for-profit institutions are regionally accredited. They offer a convenient, legitimate option for busy adults to finish or further their education. Their new approach to meeting the needs of the adult student is causing a shift in the fundamental concepts of education.

According to Davis and Botkin (1995) in *The Monster Under the Bed*, higher education is becoming more business controlled than government controlled, and the role of higher education is shifting to job preparation. But some do not see this trend as a bad thing. Berg (2002) writes that for-profit institutions that cater to adult learners have several

advantages. They require less funding from state and federal governments, support local communities by renting commercial office space, and relate well with other for-profit business. They also respond more quickly to changing markets than traditional institutions, permitting them to produce a more refined product for the marketplace. Contributing further to these positive aspects, he writes, is the fact that for-profit institutions are often managed better than non-profit institutions. They offer real-world experience to working professional, which provides efficiency through year-round schedules.

Positive Aspects of Online Education

This quick growth in online education and its promotion has led many to question its validity. However, research on the effectiveness of distance learning has been positive. Chaney (2002) references studies conducted in the areas of communication, legal assistantship, and social work. He reports that the studies show no significant difference in student learning between traditional modes of educational delivery and distance learning. Emmons (1999) reports that “the at-a-distance instructional mode itself has no significant effect on how well a student learns, as long as the technology works well . . .”(There are Advantages, para. 1) In fact, according to Chaney (2002) who quotes Gallagher, the director of Computer Mediated Learning at Duke University, technology skills gained through the e-classroom are a secondary learning outcome that can benefit the student.

Edwards, Cordray, and Dorbolo (2000) support this assertion and add that instructors can also benefit from virtual classroom experiences. They describe several ways in which online education enhances instructional performance in both traditional and virtual classroom. They claim that online classrooms lead to the development of more effective interactive tutorials that can be used to simulate real-world activities; help instructors become better

organizers due to the fact the online modules require attention to step-by-step details when conveying assignments; foster team work between instructors and technical departments; and provide immediate self-assessment for instructors through the interaction with student understanding.

The success of distance education as a means of furthering one's education is forcing even some of the most reluctant disciplines to take a closer look at the options for expanding their programs so they can keep professionals within their field up to date on current trends. In a study conducted at the Federal University of Sao Paulo-UNIFESP, Brazil, on the development of web-based courses and attitudes toward the courses of medical students, results were Encouraging. Positive aspects of web-based courses reported by students included continual access to materials, having a more elaborated and enriched content, interaction with video, and freedom of scheduling (Bernardo, 2004).

The number of institutions offering EMBA programs has grown rapidly. In 1988 just 55 accredited schools offered MBAs. That number grew to 190 in 1999 (Reingold, 1999) "Thanks to the roaring job market and companies' intense need for skilled managers, the EMBA degree is hotter than hot. Of the 100 schools surveyed by business Week for its biennial EMBA project, the average program graduated 61 MBAs [in 1999], up from 37 five years [before]" (para. 1). These numbers are sure to rise as the institutions adjust their curriculum to meet the online demand.

A study designed to assess the use of technology as a learning tool for business students reports positive results as well. Researchers looked at the impact of student use of technology on learning. The participants of the study included students enrolled in six sections of Principles of Marketing. Students were given the opportunity to use discussion

boards as a means of virtual participation. The instructor posted material, and students engaged in threaded discussions. The results show that regardless of the students' Internet experience, the use of technology had significant positive effects on learning (Krentler & Willis-Flurry, 2005).

Business is not the only program of study investigating the use of online education methods. In 1997, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Public Health launched its first distance education cohort for Public Health Leadership. Not only did satisfaction grow one year after graduates finished the program, it grew even stronger after students returned to work for a year. Nearly all graduates of the program said they would recommend the program to others (Examining the impact, 2004).

Researchers who looked at a Department of Family Medicine and Primary Care, a Department of Human Nutrition, and a Department of Nursing found support for the use of WebCT, bulletin boards, and chat rooms within the curriculum. The study focused primarily on the dialogue and exchanges between students and instructors. Through the use of exchange structure analysis, researchers observed patterns of conversations within the classroom. Overall, students supported WebCT over ITV. They also supported the use of bulletin boards and chat rooms to enhance communication in the classroom (Mash, Marais, Van Der Walt, Van Deventer, Steyn, & Labadarios, 2005).

Teacher education is another area in which online education is increasing. "Teacher upgrading is a major application of distance education, particularly in developing countries where large numbers of teachers are either untrained or under trained" (Bernardo, 2004, Uses section, para. 10). In the United States, keeping up with the training of educational administrators is a challenge as well. According to Patten (2002), distance learning permits

administrators who are confined by place and time to take courses at their convenience. He explains that these strategies have helped ease the shortage of well-trained school administrators.

Law schools are even giving online education a second look. Concord Law School started awarding law degrees online in 1998. Although it is not accredited by the American Bar Association, it is authorized to award jurist doctor degrees by the California Bureau for private Post-Secondary and Vocational Education, and graduates are allowed to seek admission by taking the bar exam. Concord is the only all-online law school in the United States; however, it is creating interest in the concept of distance learning. Concord's approach to education has given other law schools something to think ponder (Neil, 2004).

To combat critics of online education, supporters point out that 70 years of research on distance education has documented the effectiveness of its courses as compared to traditional courses (Potashnik, 1998). Research conducted on the effectiveness of distance education reports no significant difference in the outcomes of online education programs when compared with traditional educational experiences, reports Meyer (2002). Technology is only the delivery truck, he explains. It does not have an impact on achievement.

To aid in the effectiveness of online education, the Institute for Higher Policy (IHEP) published *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-based Distance Education* in April of 2000. The report was prepared by the National Education Association and Blackboard. It identifies faculty and student support as areas important to the evaluation of successful distance education programs and services. The student support section includes assessment of readiness, marketing, requirement and service information, admissions, registrations, and financial processes. It is designed to highlight services that help students

partake in an engaged experience when completing online classes (Novak, 2002).

One subsection within the report that relates the importance of providing inclusion services to online education students is particularly relevant. It “emphasizes building a sense of community for distance education students through actions such as encouraging study groups, providing student directories, including off-campus students in institutional publications and events, including these students in definitions of the academic community...” (Novak, 2002, p. 85). Other researchers support these kinds of initiatives as well.

Blimling encourages educational professionals to evaluate the effectiveness of changing technology within online education in order to provide seamless service to all students. The goal is to find out if students who complete their coursework through online education develop the same skills, graduate at the same rate, and build the same institutional spirit as students completing coursework through traditional means.

Impact of Educational Attainment on Employability

When viewed from a sociological standpoint, online education may not be on the same echelon as traditional forms of educational delivery. There may be certain human, social realities that prevent online education from becoming widely accepted in American society. Early sociologists theorized that following the industrial revolution, education became a commodity powerful enough to secure prestige in Western culture (Lenski, 1966; Mills & Hans, 1953; Weber, 1947). Occupations and the credentials to obtain them began to play a big part in the division of social status. Because social standing often determines the goods and services available, the ability to elevate social status becomes very important to one’s livelihood.

Weber (1947), a sociologist during the late 1800s and early 1900s, studied the impact of career choice on social status. He theorized that individuals gain certain privileges according to their particular social status in the community. He explained that the provision of goods to an individual is contingent on the amount of power the individual has over those around him. To gain power, Weber explains, one must gain social status. Social status can be gained at birth if one belongs to a prestigious family. If not born into a prestigious family, one must earn or acquire status by developing a particular style of living. One variable that helps in the effort to secure prestige is the ability to acquire credentials by seeking educational opportunities.

During the 1950s through the 1970s, Mills, Hans, and Lenski expanded on Weber's theory. They published works highlighting stratification in Western society. Their works revealed the importance of using education to obtain prestige through one's occupation. Mills and Hans (1953) discovered four dimensions of stratifications that people use to rank themselves—occupation, class, status, and power. Among these, occupation is the most important, they contend, because it is the only dimension that has the power to change the other three. They write that the amount and the type of education one has is directly related to occupation, and therefore, directly related to prestige:

The shift to a society of employees has made occupation and the educational sphere crucially important. Insofar as occupation determines the level of income, and different styles of life require different income levels, occupation limits and style of life. In a more direct way, different occupations require different levels and types of education, and education also limits the style of life and thus the status successfully claimed. (Hans & Mills, 1953, p 317)

Their writings solidified the importance of education in modern society.

In *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, Lenski (1966) further defines the shift in society that left the ability to gain prestige so heavily reliant upon the ability to obtain a higher level of education. He explained that in traditional agrarian societies, education was not an important factor in determining the ability to purchase goods and services. Most work was manual in nature. Men and women earned their living by the strength of their back. Only those of the privileged class were concerned with a formal education. However, with the dawning of the industrial age, work became more specialized and education became a commodity that could propel one forward.

Lenski (1966) theorized that the chief determinant of the status of a man's job was his level of education. Previous research supported his theory. In his book, Lenski describes a study conducted by North and Hatt shortly after World War II and a reevaluation of that study by Dudley Duncan in the 1950s. The study shows that "five-sixths of the variance in occupational prestige is accounted for, statistically, by a linear combination of the indicators income and educational levels of occupation" (p. 430). This means that the variance in prestige is a result of occupational power and privilege, which relies heavily upon educational credentials. Power is influence, and influence is prestige.

Vance Packard wrote in his 1961 work, *The Status Seekers*, "In the past, the high-school diploma was a ticket of admission to a white-collar job. Now, many millions of American youngsters have the ticket, so there is less prestige attached to putting on a white collar" (p. 33-34). He noted that with the growth of the middle class, the line between classes became thinner. The primary way in which upper and middle class families could distinguish themselves quickly became the level of opportunity provided their children to

attend college.

Perception of Online Education in the Employment Market

Although the growth of distance education has skyrocketed, and more and more people are taking advantage of technology to obtain their degree, the credibility of online degrees in the marketplace is still in question. Rick Hesel, principal at Art & Science Group wonders how much credibility an online degree has in the real-world marketplace (Levin, 1997). "I would imagine there would be a bias against online degrees of any kind. Face-to-face contact with the faculty is considered to be a mark of quality, and because this program doesn't have that, I think both employers and prospective students would be wary" he said (para. 8). He is not alone in his perceptions.

Even when online degrees are awarded by well-established state and private universities, degrees are sometimes seen as less valuable by employers (Russell, 2004). "At the Five O'clock club, a national career counseling and job placement firm based in New York, chief operating officer Richard Bayer said he advises clients not to mention it if they earned degrees online, because such degrees are often seen as less prestigious" (para. 3). C. Peskoe, a hiring partner at Golenbock, Eiseman, Assor & Bell, a Manhattan law firm, said "he would be wary of hiring someone from an online school" (USU, 1999, para. 15). The issue may stem from the fact that many employers went the traditional path to receive their degree. They may feel that there is something valuable in attending class on-campus. This way of thinking may lead to a bias in favor of traditional degrees (Russell, 2004).

In a 2002 dissertation study conducted at Indiana State University, results showed that although online learning may be beneficial to students and universities, employers participating in the study did not see distance education as equal to traditional forms of

education. Interviews were conducted with human resources personnel in eight pharmaceutical companies. The purpose of the study was to collect information about the perception of online degrees by human resources personnel. The results indicate resistance by employers in recognizing equality in online and traditional education (Chaney, 2002).

Peter Stokes, Executive Vice President of Eduventures, disagrees. On a broadcast of *Talk of the Nation*, a National Public Radio program, he reported to Neal Conan (2006) that 62% of the employers his company has polled believe that online education is as good as or better than traditional modes of delivery. However, he failed to adequately define the employers he alluded to on the program. He further commented that only 1/3 of students have as much confidence in online education. Yet again, he did not elaborate on the identity of the student body for which he discussed.

A study conducted by Fern University in Germany found students have favorable opinion of distance education. The study found that 52.9% of Diploma II students and 54.2% of Diploma I graduates believe their degree is worth just as much as a traditionally obtained degree. Graduates also believe Fern University degrees are highly valued in the marketplace, bringing them better chances for promotion, a broader knowledge base, and better pay (Bartels, 1989). However, the study was conducted in 1984, long before the explosion of online education. More recent studies need to be conducted.

Summary

In the competitive educational market, it is important for education professionals to offer programs and services that not only meet the needs of the student but also offer evidence of effectiveness in contributing to the education of society as a whole. With the increased demand for convenient educational opportunities, institutions of higher education have a

window of opportunity to mold distance learning into a reputable form of educational delivery (Adams and DeFleur, 2006; Chaney 2002; Levin, 1997; Russell, 2004; USU, 1999). If distance education is not being seen as a legitimate form of educational delivery, now is the time for evaluation and correction. It is the time to embrace distance education as a form of education students can use to secure their place in the workforce and increase their commercial standing.

Chapter III - Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative methods offered the ability to collect in-depth information about perceptions. The alignment of qualitative methods with a constructionist epistemology allowed for in-depth analysis of the social paradigms formed about online education. In this study, a qualitative approach made it possible to explore the constructed reality formed by employers through their interaction with online education, including personal experiences, employee relationships, and public advertisements. The study was not concerned with comparing data sets, as is appropriate when using a quantitative approach. Its purpose was discovery, not statistical reasoning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore employers' perceptions of online education and to identify the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions.

Research Questions

1. How do employers perceive the quality of online coursework and/or degrees in comparison to more traditional education?
2. What differences do employers perceive between non-profit institutions that offer online coursework and for-profit institutions that offer online coursework?
3. What concerns do employers have about the educational path of their potential employees, and how do these concerns impact the hiring process?

4. What effect has the advertisement of online education and concrete exposure to online education (personal or through employee contact) had on employers' perceptions of online education?

Qualitative Research Criteria

The theoretical perspective for this study was constructionism. Therefore, a constructionism criterion was followed in creating trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the criteria for constructionist research are different from traditional, social science research. They contend that constructionist researchers seek deeper understanding through awareness and acceptance of their own subjectivity. To a traditional scientific researcher, accepting the inclusion of subjectivity creates suspicion. To overcome this suspicion, the researcher in this study created trustworthiness by maintaining stringent research criteria. These criteria included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility within qualitative research depends upon the belief in the value of qualitative methods, rigorous methods, and the credibility of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The researcher for this study believes strongly in the integrity of qualitative research. She used a holistic approach when conducting research and analyzing information. She used the criteria of adequacy and appropriateness by collecting an adequate number of participants and using purposeful random sampling to create an appropriate participant pool (Rudestam & Newton, 2001). She obtained high-quality data through the use of triangulation, conducting interviews, and collecting artifacts from multiple participants.

Member checks were conducted following the interviews. Member checks enhance the credibility by establishing accuracy of the interview data. They provided an assessment of intentionality, offered an opportunity for correction, and established understanding between the interviewee and researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each interviewee was given the opportunity to read the transcript of his/her interview and make additions or corrections. Transcripts were sent to the participants through email. Of the six participants, two made minor revisions to their transcripts. The rest emailed back a confirmation that the transcript represented the conversation between themselves and the researcher.

The credibility of the researcher was demonstrated through peer debriefing, which took place between the researcher and her dissertation advisor and committee members. Credibility was further demonstrated through the disclosure of researcher subjectivity in Chapter III and research limitations in Chapter V.

Transferability

Transferability is a function of the “fittingness” of contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Transferability in qualitative research relies on the researcher’s ability to keep a meticulous audit trail (Rudenstam & Newton, 2001). The researcher kept records concerning not only the data collected, but the manner in which it was collected, condensed, and analyzed. Member checks and peer debriefing also aided in the establishment of transferability by assessing the accuracy of the information gathered and providing an opportunity for summarizing the information, which is the first step in analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the sense making of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). Dependability was achieved through the use of triangulation in data collection, keeping a meticulous audit trail, peer debriefing, and member checks. These elements aided in dependability by providing a source of verification and an opportunity for entry-level analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data was collected through interviews and artifact collection, linking the two contexts. The audit trail included details about context and processes, which highlighted the link between the formal and informal processes within the participating companies. Peer debriefing was conducted between the interviewer and the researcher's dissertation advisor and committee members, providing better understanding through dialogue. Interviewees were asked to complete a check of the interview transcripts, creating a way to assess for accuracy of data.

Confirmability

Confirmability relies on the process of verifying the data in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The researcher checked and rechecked the information gathered for the study by conducting member checks and peer debriefing. All materials collected were coded to allow for the tracking of data back to its original source. Citations were kept during the collection and analysis of the information. Limitations and subjectivity were analyzed and revealed. These elements provided a means of tracking the information back to its source, which corroborated the authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Researcher Subjectivity

I come to the study with a background in online education. I have experience as a coordinator of a distance education program on a university campus. I teach an online class at

the university level. I have also taught technology classes on several other academic levels. My involvement with online education initially led me to this study because I was often asked by distance education students how their degrees will be perceived in the workplace. “Our distance degree is accredited by the same organization that accredits our traditional degree,” was the only answer I could provide. I wanted to be able to provide a better answer.

Aside from professional involvement, I have experienced online education as a graduate student. Although I trust in the value of online education, I personally prefer to take classes through traditional means. I understand that online education is not right for all individuals. I believe personality and study preferences have an impact on the outcomes of distance education. Those who are not suited to the method of delivery may not be successful.

Because I have an intimate relationship with online distance education, I come to the study with several concerns. As a qualitative researcher, I know that who I am and the reality I have constructed through my experiences with online education enter into my research. I have preconceived notions about the credibility of online education. I also have preconceived notions about other people’s perceptions of online education. These preconceived notions may have affected the development and outcome of this study.

Not only do I come to the study with subjective views, the participants in the study may also come to the study with subjective perceptions as well. As stated earlier, perceptions are not always based on fact. They are formed from personal and social experience. From a constructionist view point, subjectivity cannot be totally erased from any study (Crotty, 2003). This study is not an exception. However, subjectivity will be minimized by constructing objective interview questions and conducting member checks.

Data Needs and Sources

The data needed for the study included personal interviews, field notes, and artifacts. The sources of the information included interview sessions with supervisors or department heads at participating companies, observations made about the physical and cultural aspects of each interview site, and artifacts collected from each participating company's websites.

Participant Solicitation

Purposeful sampling was used to select 15 prospective companies that employed more than 500 employees and were located in the Midwest. The pool of 15 potential employers was chosen from the Tulsa Metro Chamber's Largest Employer List, published in 2006 (Appendix E). The Largest Employer List was selected because it was readily available through the Chamber's website, allowing for the identification of the largest employers in Tulsa without the need to do independent, company research. The Chamber is a reputable organization that is well established in the city; therefore, the researcher presumed credibility of the list.

The condition that companies chosen for the study employ more than 500 employees was established to increase the probability that employees and supervisors within the companies had experience with online education. Further prerequisites in the selection of the final company pool were that the company be for-profit, non-medical, non-manufacturing, non-retail, and service-oriented companies. These prerequisites were selected to produce a company pool that had a high likelihood of employing people who have business oriented degrees and work within the service industry. Online undergraduate and graduate business degrees are prevalent in the higher education arena. Students have ample opportunity to obtain a business degree within a variety of specialties and from both traditional and online institutions; therefore, increasing the probability that experience with online education existed

in the study.

After approval by the appropriate Institutional Review Board (IRB, Appendix F), I solicited interviews by initially contacting the Human Resources department of potential companies via telephone and email. I requested the name and contact information of potential interviewees as well as best procedures for initial contact—telephone, email, or formal letter. See Appendix A and B for telephone/email scripts and formal letter text.

Solicitation was challenging due to the makeup of the company pool. All of the companies were large, regional or national service companies. The protocol for the study stated that primary contact would be through the human resources departments. Many large, regional or national companies limit access to human resources departments to online applications or form requests, and many of the companies do not have human resources departments within the Tulsa area. Telephone numbers, email addresses, and specific contact names were difficult to locate. This made it challenging to set up interviews with those employed within the Tulsa metropolitan area because the human resources representatives have little personal contact with the Tulsa offices. Therefore, it took a considerable amount of time and effort for them to locate a willing participant in Tulsa. Most were not willing to take on such a task. Suggestions for future solicitation methods are presented in the limitations section of this study in Chapter V.

The order of contact from the participant pool was by random drawing. Of the initial 15 companies within the pool, one no longer existed at the time of the interviews, leaving 14 in the pool. Two had name changes but retained their employee and service bases. Telephone contact was made with 11 companies. Follow-up emails were sent to four companies. A total of six companies agreed to participate in the study—43%. Of those who did not participate,

three Human Resources departments could not be contacted, only service numbers were available. Four companies failed to respond after multiple telephone and email messages. One Human Resources representative stated that she would look into whether the company would allow the interview, but no answer was received by the researcher even after follow-up phone message.

Participants

In all cases, Human Resources representatives said telephone and email were the preferred methods for contacting potential interviewees within their companies. No formal letters were sent. One supervisor or department head from within each of the six companies was selected for interview, creating a total of six interviews. The requirement that the interviewee be a supervisor or department head helped to ensure that all interviewees had the authority to hire employees for the company. All participants in the study met this requirement and had hiring privileges. Four of the participants had local responsibilities as well as remote location responsibilities. The other two participants had local responsibilities, with both direct and indirect reports. Two participants were responsible for teams that do central hiring for the entire company or region.

All of the interviewees worked in large service-oriented companies within the Mid-West. They included telecommunications, data systems, insurance, finance, and rental businesses. The names of the companies were withheld to protect confidentiality. The job titles of the participants were also withheld. Revealing titles could have lead to the accidental disclosure of the participant.

Four of the participants were males, and two were females. Five of the participants appeared to be Caucasian and one appeared to be African American, but again, race was not

confirmed with participants. Gender, age, and race were not taken into consideration in the analysis for this study.

Data Collection

The researcher used interviews as the main collection tool and artifact collection and field notes as a supplement. The questions for the interviews were generated by me specifically for this specific study. They fit the scope of the project by elaborating on the research questions constructed for the study. In addition to interviews, I collected artifacts detailing hiring practices within participating companies (Interview Guide, Appendix C) and took field notes. These processes created data triangulation. Data triangulation was used to create dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

Interviews

Interviews took place in person and were completed at the various company locations. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour, with two interviews lasting for approximately 75 minutes.

Once the interviews were conducted and transcribed, the researcher sent a copy of the transcripts via email to the respective interviewees for a member check. Of the six participants, two made minor revisions to their transcripts. The remaining participants emailed back a confirmation that the transcript represented the conversation between themselves and the researcher.

Artifacts

The researcher collected artifacts detailing hiring practices via each company's human resources department website. The artifacts included the following items:

- Profiles for each company or human resources department.

- At least two job postings for each company.
- Professional development or continuing education benefit summaries for four companies.
- Equal opportunity or diversity statements for all companies.

The artifacts provided information about formal processes required for obtaining a position. They also provided insight into the companies' business philosophies. Artifacts are presented in Chapter IV as data collected and interwoven in the analysis in Chapter V.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken at each interview location. The notes revealed information about the atmosphere and philosophy at each of the companies. They are important to the study because they support the themes that emerged during analysis and complement the discussion. They show an alignment between mood, body language, and verbal communication. The field notes are presented in Chapter IV as findings and interwoven in the analysis in Chapter V.

Analysis Procedures

Content analysis was used to analyze the information collected. It was used to extract themes by searching for reoccurring words or phrases (Patton, 2002). The extraction of themes from the interview transcripts included coding through the use of pawing and pile-sorting. First, I pawed through the interview transcripts and artifacts by reading the materials and highlighting information pertaining to the perception of online education. Second, I divided the highlighted material into small chunks or units of two to three sentences each. Third, I transferred the smaller units of information to note cards, writing the number assigned to the interviewee in the top left corner of the card. Next, I

divided the unit cards into initial categories based on similarity of unit meaning by writing a category title on the top right-hand portion of the index card. Finally, I reshuffled the cards and repeated the division process until only consistent, reoccurring themes remained.

Using the recurring themes, I wrote a card title on the front of each card based on the last assigned category for each unit. I then assigned sub-themes to cards by using previously assigned category titles that had been written in the top right-hand portion of the index card during previous assignment shuffles. The card titles and sub-themes served as a guide to the general perceptions of online education held by interviewees.

Saturation

Data collection produced saturation. The answers given during the interview process were similar from participant to participant. They each agreed on the key drawbacks and benefits of online education. They all described similar procedures related to online education, continuing education, and corporate training. And, they all identified similar social predigests related to online education. Overall, the participants had similar views about online education and its role within the corporate world.

All participating companies' websites included similar information regarding hiring practices and employee benefits. They each provided descriptions of their company, including their commitment to continuing education for employees and the desire to be competitive in the global market. Each promoted continuing education as an enticement for employment with the company.

The atmosphere at each of the companies was similar as well. Most of the interviewees were casually dressed, but professional in manner. Each had similar levels

of security. Professionalism seemed to be important. However, an air of concern for the employees prevailed.

Analytical Lens

Mere Exposure Theory was used as a lens when analyzing the themes that emerge from the information about exposure to online education. It has been theorized that being exposed to a certain stimulus repeatedly can create a sense of acceptance within people's minds (ChangingMinds.org). The theory is called Mere Exposure. Baker (1999) explains that, "Mere Exposure is commonly believed to evoke a basic habituation response that renders a stimulus less threatening and hence, more approachable" (p. 32). The theory, first proposed by Robert Zajonc in the late 1960s, has since been the subject of much research in classical conditioning (Baker, 1999). It is thought that the underlying mechanism of mere exposure produces an uncertainty reduction in subjects and creates a sense of acceptance, allowing subjects to become attached to the stimulus (Lee, 1994).

Old realities are exchanged for new realities through the concept of stratification. Stratification allows layers of meaning to form, creating barriers between old and new realities and allowing individuals, groups, and societies to move in new directions (Crotty, 2003). Exposure to new stimuli is one way in which stratification happens. Exposure to new things forces humans to assimilate new information and make judgments based on their current concepts of reality. The more exposure one has to a stimulus, the more concrete the reality becomes in the mind of the creator.

One area where Mere Exposure has shown positive results is within the field of advertising. Advertisers use Mere Exposure to encourage people to buy products. Television commercials, magazine ads, and radio spots convince people that the populace at large is

buying a particular product by exposing them to the merchandise on a daily basis. People believe the product is in demand; they buy it, and it becomes a part of the existing culture.

In a study conducted by Baker (1999), using 142 junior and senior business administration students at Northeastern University, the effect of Mere Exposure theory was put to a test. Researchers exposed participants to advertisements for the product categories toothpaste and motor oil. Results showed exposure to various product slides had a strong effect on the brand choices students made.

Politicians also use Mere Exposure Theory to bring awareness to certain subjects they deem important. They expose the public to their views repeatedly until the population accepts the views, which then become a part of popular thinking. In a study conducted by Miller (1976) at Georgetown University, 115 undergraduate college students were assigned randomly to four treatment conditions, including no exposure, moderate exposure, overexposure, and exposure removal. The stimulus was a one-foot-by-two-foot poster which read, "REDUCE FOREIGN AID." The bottom of the poster requested volunteers for a U.S. Congress protest campaign. Results showed that those exposed to the stimulus developed positive attitudes toward the message. Greater exposure also produced more volunteers for the protest campaign.

Mere Exposure Theory may have the same effects on the higher education system. Due to advances in technology, more and more colleges and universities advertise online education. Advertisements for online learning can be found in every medium. Radio and television producers air advertisements that tout the convenience and affordability of getting a college degree via distance. Magazine and newspaper ads tell of profits that can be gained by obtaining a college degree and highlight the advantages of seeking the degree outside the

classroom. In the May 10, 2005, edition of *Woman's Day* magazine alone, the mention of online education is found in two separate articles as a way for busy women with full-time jobs and families to obtain a college degree. Even a simple search of the Internet produces thousands of pages devoted to online learning.

Chapter IV – Data Presentation

The material in this chapter includes summaries of the artifacts, field notes, and interviews collected during the study. For ease of presentation, the interview responses are arranged in the order of the questions asked during the interview process. The themes that emerged throughout the process of pile-sorting are discussed in detail in Chapter V.

Field Notes

Field notes were taken at each interview location. The notes revealed information about the atmosphere at the companies and the possible philosophies. Field notes are important to the study because they support the themes that emerged in the study and the analysis of the themes. They show an alignment between mood, body language, and verbal communication.

There was a visible security presence at each of the companies. Four of the companies required me to check in at a guard station before obtaining access to employee areas within the building. Another location required me to sign in at the reception area. The final company required paperwork for Homeland Security before obtaining passage to the parking area of the company. It also required me to sign in at a second guard station located at the entrance of the building.

The guard stations and reception areas at the companies were separated from the remainder of the building by locked doors. Four of the six companies required me to wear a visitor badge. The other two locations required me to be accompanied to and from the interview area by a company employee.

In spite of the high security, the environment at companies seemed welcoming to visitors as well as employees. Three of the facilities had large common areas where employees were gathered together eating, laughing, and talking. One of the companies was having a Valentine's Day celebration in the common area on the day of the interview. The large, open room had several long tables covered with food. One of the tables supported two chocolate fountains. Groups of employees were gathered by the tables dipping the various food offerings into the chocolate. Other groups sat at the smaller tables scattered throughout the room. Music played in the background. Initially, the participant at the company had planned to carry out the interview on the balcony overlooking the common area, but the noise was too great, so it was relocated to a conference room.

All participants were pleasant. They welcomed me graciously and were hospitable throughout the process. One of the participants seemed particularly pleased with the topic of the study. Prior to the research interview, he stated that he and a coworker had just been talking about the subject a few days before my request for an interview. He said when he heard about my request, he was eager to talk to me. He indicated frustration with the discriminatory attitudes about online education that he has encountered in his field.

Two of the participants apologized in advance in case they were called out of the interview for an emergency. Their positions required the security of large databases, which often leads to emergency situations, they explained. In the end, they were not called out.

One of the interviews was delayed for an hour due to an unexpected meeting. I

waited at the guard station while the interviewee met with her department head. The participant was apologetic for the wait, but explained that it was unavoidable. The interview was completed later the same day.

Four of the six interviews were conducted in the participants' offices. The first interviewee's office was quite large, approximately 20 X 20. It had an attached waiting area out front. The office was formally decorated, with large windows overlooking looking the city skyline and oil paintings on the walls. Wooden shelves filled with books and decorative pieces lined the wall behind a large, wooden desk. Family photos sat facing the participant on the desk. During the interview, the participant sat at his desk, and I sat opposite him.

Two of the other offices were smaller and less formal. The furniture was not decorative; it was more functional with an unceremonious feel. One of the desks was metal with a Formica desktop. The other was wooden, but not ornamental as with the first desk. Folders and documents covered the tops of the desks. Several metal filing cabinets took up space on the walls. Both offices had large windows on the back walls opposite the entryways. During the interviews, the participants sat at their desks and I sat on the opposite side.

The fourth office was cubicle style. It was small, approximately 10 X 10, with walls that were between five and six feet tall. The office was located on the west end of a row of connecting cubicles. The building that housed the office had a glass exterior. The interviewee had a beach umbrella propped up against the outside cubicle wall to block the sun streaming through the glass. The umbrella gave the area a whimsical quality. Several other cubicles had umbrellas extending upward as well. It looked like a beach

with gray felt sand. Like the other three office interviews, the interview took place at the participant's desk.

The final two interviews were conducted in conference rooms. One of the conference rooms was rectangular in shape with a large table extending the length of the room. The table was lined with rolling chairs and had a seating capacity of 15 to 20. The walls of the room were unadorned, with only a single clock that was located close to the entrance to the room and no windows. I chose to sit at the end of the table with my back toward the door, and the interviewee sat on the left side of the table facing me.

The other conference area interview was held in a small room, probably an interview room. It too was unadorned. A single round table sat in the center of the room. It had four rolling chairs placed around it. There was not room for anything else. The door had a single frosted window, which let in light but obscured the view into the hallway. The interviewee and I sat opposite one another at the table.

The attire worn by the interviewees created a casual feel for the researcher. Only one of the participants was dressed in a suit, however the jacket was removed, creating a professional but more relaxed look. One of the male participants wore a pullover sweater and a pair of slacks. The other three males wore polo-type shirts and khaki pants. The two female participants wore jeans and pullover shirts. One interview was held on Friday, and one interview was held on a holiday, which might account for the casual dress at these locations, but casual dress may be allowed at the remaining three locations on a daily basis.

Overall, the atmosphere at the participating companies seemed inviting. Yet, it kept a business-like feel. Referring back to the company websites that included statements like "challenge the status quo" and words like "value" and "premier," it was clear

that expectations were high. However, creating an environment conducive to meeting both corporate and individual goals was also evident.

The participants seemed to be comfortable with technology. Each discussed using technology within the workplace. Two of the companies worked directly with technology and telecommunications. The four participants who were interviewed in their office areas had computers on their desks. Email was used to conduct member checks on the transcripts.

All of the interviewees seemed to have a positive attitude toward continuing education for employees. Each spoke optimistically about the importance of employees aligning personal goals with organizational goals. They described company policies that included financial support for achieving educational goals. The interviewees showed more animation when this topic was discussed. They leaned forward and used hand gestures more during the conversation. They smiled more as they talked about employees having the opportunity to achieve their educational goals. The company websites also indicated a dedication to continuing education, with enticements for achieving personal goals while working toward company goals.

When asked whether they felt for-profit and non-profit institutions were seen as equal, the participants' body language revealed reservations. Two of the participants brought their hands to their chest and reminded the researcher that their opinions did not necessarily represent the views of others. "I am only speaking for myself, not for the company," they implied. Their facial expressions seemed to say, "I am supportive of a variety of educational opportunities, but I know that some people are not." One participant said that she knew some of the people she works with disapprove of for-profit and online education. She qualified her feelings by pointing out that she has had personal

experience with online education, whereas those she referred to had not. She seemed to be saying that exposure creates a more positive attitude toward online education.

One participant's body language showed frustration about the negative attitudes he encounters about online education. He threw his hands out at one point, indicating he did not know what to do. He then put one hand to his forehead in a gesture indicating lack of understanding and aggravation.

Artifacts

I collected artifacts detailing hiring practices via each company's human resources department website. The artifacts included company or human resources profiles; at least two job postings; professional development or continuing education benefit summaries; and equal opportunity statements.

The terminology used on the company and human resources profiles gave clues about the philosophies of the participating companies. Key words used on the websites such as "national," "world," and "global" implied practices that have far-reaching tentacles, and affect the global marketplace. Phrases like "challenge the status quo" and words like "value" and "premier" implied attention to quality service. On the human resources pages of the company websites phrases like "multitude of opportunities," "values our employees," and "boost your career potential" created an enticement for applicants. "Work toward your personal and professional goals with us," was the implication.

One of the company's human resources website had an advertisement for University of Phoenix. The link was on the description pages for their job postings. Including such a link may be interpreted by some to indicate approval of for-profit, online institutions. Another human resources website had links to on-campus recruiting institutions, including Oklahoma,

Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas. Four human resources websites had information about corporate training and continuing education. Inclusions such as these created a feeling of thoughtfulness and concern for employee goals and tied in the company profiles.

All participating companies had equal opportunity statements on their human resources pages or directly printed on job postings. Equal opportunity statements did not mention education specifically, but implied equality in all areas. There was no indication that the companies would not seek employees with online degrees or coursework.

Two of the websites had strong diversity statements. One used the words “respect,” “inclusion,” and “value” to describe the environment at the company. Its equal opportunity statement stated that the company “valued the diversity of its people.” The other company used words such as “inclusive” and “group” to describe its attitude toward diversity. For them “diversity isn’t a program; it’s a state of mind.”

None of the job postings listed on the human resources websites excluded application by those with an online degree. The postings included a wide arrange of opportunities including jobs that require college degrees and jobs that do not. Postings that required a bachelor’s degree did not specify the method of obtaining a degree. Nowhere on the sites was there any indication that the company would not be supportive on online education.

Interview Responses

Two of the requirements for the study were that participants had supervisory or department head responsibilities and hiring authority. All participants in the study met these requirements. Four of the participants had local responsibilities as well as remote location responsibilities. The other two participants had local responsibilities, with both direct and indirect reports. Two participants were responsible for teams that do central

hiring for the entire company or region. Four of the participants were males, and two were females. All of the interviewees worked in large service-oriented companies. They included telecommunications, data systems, insurance, finance, and rental businesses.

Exposure to Online Education

When asked how they were exposed or educated about the availability of online coursework or degree programs in the local area, all interviewees stated that their companies offer a continuing education program, where employees receive tuition reimbursement for taking college classes. As a way of informing the company and the employees about the educational opportunities within the area, the companies offer annual university fairs.

Part of our benefit package for our employees is the opportunity to pursue a continuing education. Once or twice a year, we will have an on-campus fair, where the universities come—where they will be represented. That is a significant driver in terms of how potential students reach out to the various universities, and frankly, how they reach out to us... Therein, probably becomes one of the main avenues for the university to talk about online or specific adult education--tracking at a part-time level versus a more traditional program.

(Interview 1)

A consensus with regard to continuing education packages was apparent. All participants described their management positions as that of informers, not advisors. The company provides information avenues such as college fairs and brochures, and then they allow the employee to choose the option that works best for him or her.

There were no restrictions concerning online education versus traditional

education within the continuing education packages. Employees may attend a non-profit or for-profit university as long as it is accredited. The only restrictions were price and coursework relevance. Employees are allotted a specific amount of money to spend each fiscal year and must choose coursework relevant to their job. One participant made the following comment:

Whether they go to University X or University Y, it doesn't matter. [There are] no restrictions on whether it is a Ph.D. or an undergrad, but where the restrictions do lie are what the classes are. (Interview 3)

A second participant had this comment:

There are some restrictions on universities. They have to be accredited by whatever organization accredits universities in the state. Our corporate education and development department goes through and researches all of the accredited universities. When [an employee] submits his/her application, they do additional research because they have to establish what the fees are--IRS standard, \$5280 per calendar year. (Interview 2)

All interviewees expressed a strong desire to help employees pursue an education by any means appropriate.

There was a split in the number of participants who had personal experience with online education through a college or university. One participant had personally taken college-credit online classes. Another participant looked into taking an online class at one point in his search for a master's degree. The remaining participants had not taken a college-credit course, but had engaged in corporate training online.

Although the participant with personal experience in college-credit classes had

positive things to say about the experience, she also expressed disappointment with a particular class.

It was online--which I like online. I can [work at] my own pace that way, but I was disappointed in the material that was presented. It was less detailed, I should say, than I like to see. I wanted more interaction. (Interview 6)

She further explained that she was working toward a certificate and had a lot of questions. She was required to call a telephone number or email her questions, which created a day turnaround, much longer than she would have liked.

One of the participant's spouses had also taken online coursework through a college or university. She had a positive experience, her husband said. It allowed her flexibility. He also alluded to the fact that students get out of online education what they put into it. "...She is a good student, and that's one of the reasons that I say that [what a person gets out of an equation] depends on what the person puts into it" (Interview 2).

In addition to continuing education and personal experience, two participants said they have knowledge of employees within the company who are currently taking for-credit, online coursework. These experiences had been positive.

Participants Describe Online Educational Media

Study participants had a good grasp on the realities of online educational media. One of the participants stated it well by saying, "[Online education] can be--I think--as simple or complex as the university or program wants to make it" (Interview 5). When asked what components are available in online education, description such as simply reading text and taking exams online to creating an interactive online environment where students and professors utilize video, sound, and chat technologies were offered. One

participant described a personal experience where recordings were accessible online, allowing students to listen at their own convenience and replay portions for clarity.

Someone will do the training and record it. Then, I go out there and listen to it at my own pace. It is kind of like my iPod. I can go out there and listen to it to a certain point, [and] then I have to take a call or leave. When I come back, it will pick up right where I stopped. (Interview 6)

She described this in a positive manner, making it clear that online training is convenient for the student to fit into the typical work day.

All participants expressed a desire for a mixed approach to online education, taking advantage of a growing educational opportunity by providing an array of components that suit learning styles.

I think for it to be effective, you also have to do the written form as well because not everybody learns the same way. That's the problem with online education as well. Not everybody learns the same way. Some are auditory versus actually reading it. So you have to have flexibility in your programs to account for those learners—all learners. (Interview 5)

It was believed that a mixed approach is necessary when working in an environment that has the potential of creating a disconnect between student and professors and student and fellow classmates. "I think that is where I would view that there is a significant difference or almost a disconnect [in online education] because you're self-paced..." one of the participants said (Interview 3).

Future Role of Online Education

There is no doubt from talking to participants that they overwhelmingly believed

that online education is on the increase, especially as technologies become better refined. Competitive, flexible, convenient, and globally accessible are just some of the reasons participants believed online education will continue to grow. One participant said:

I think you're probably going to see it more. I see it picking up more because that is what people want. Those wanting to go back and get their education will probably look for those more flexible ways to obtain it. (Interview 5)

Another participant said:

I think frankly, the opportunity for a single mother [who] has a family [who] is working full-time to pursue a degree through being at her home online versus trying to schedule. I think those realities are not going away. They are becoming increasingly challenging. (Interview 1)

Participants spoke about online education's capacity to provide educational opportunities for those living in remote areas, fill in local educational gaps, and allow for a broader, more prestigious range of faculty expertise because it offers faculty members living in one area of the United States or world the opportunity to conduct a class in a totally different location. It offers higher education administrators the ability to expand their geographical boundaries to include professors outside of a designated area. Two of the participants made the following comments:

That opportunity for online education to tap into resources that are outside your geographical boundaries, or tap into expertise that is not resident, I think it is pretty powerful, said a participant. (Interview 1)

I think people will start to take advantage of more programs that may be out of our geographical area because people have educational pursuits that are not

provided by University X, Y, or Z, said another. (Interview 2)

Their comments were all aimed in a positive direction and pointed to continued growth in online education. However, participants stated that online education has limits. One participant specifically stated that although online education is growing, it should not become the dominate form of educational delivery.

So, I think it is going to be a growing role. It would seem to me that it is--and this is just my opinion--not in and of itself, the primary educational delivery tool. I think it becomes one of many tools in the toolbox that the university has that fits the students' needs and perhaps, employers' needs too. (Interview 1)

This statement corresponds to answers given by participants to queries about the components of online education. Learning styles should always be considered when designing any educational opportunity, participants said. It is particularly important to take advantage of a mixture of online educational components when designing virtual learning environments. Every attempt should be made to accommodate a variety of learning styles.

Another area where participants forecasted growth in the online arena is corporate education. Two participants discussed the professional development opportunities at their companies. "Professional development, required courses, training courses--we have e-learning capabilities with a lot of things we do" expressed one participant (Interview 2).

Another participant said:

[Employees] are going to come to us with that higher education already, and then how do we supplement that with the areas of need that they may not get from that general education? (Interview 4)

All of the participating companies offered some form of online corporate training to aid in building specific skills within their employment bases.

Online vs. Traditional Education

The interviews uncovered both positive and negative comments about the quality of online education compared to the traditional degree path. It appears that perceived barriers are starting to relax. Flexibility, convenience, technological growth, and cost effectiveness are some of the positive aspects mentioned. Three of the participants made the following comments.

I really think the barriers are breaking down because internally, where people may have gone to a class where they had to travel a day, be in a class for a day, and travel back the next day. Now they are getting that in our attractive distance learning program. The fact that we're leveraging technology appeals to me because as we talk about competition in the workplace and technical savvy. [It is a benefit to] people [who have the ability to] exchange in that type of environment when they come into the workplace because they are not afraid of distance learning. (Interview 2)

...I have talked to people who have done both—who have gotten a degree face-to-face at a very well known college and then online. I have often heard that the classes and what they get online was way more difficult than the stuff that they did in the classes. (Interview 3)

I think someone can get a four-year degree online and have just as good an education as someone going to a classroom for four years. (Interview 6)

However, not all participants were as eager to fully embrace the total online degree.

Some of the negatives included lack of face-to-face interaction, fear of educational misconduct, inability to receive live feedback, and the creation of a disconnect due to isolation. One of the participants expressed the following misgivings.

...[traditional] class, I think, gives you additional learning opportunities that you lose online. So, I think [online education] is a threat [to the traditional way of obtaining a degree]. I think it's not necessarily a good thing. Learning to work in groups, learning to focus in that type of environment, the networking, teambuilding, the analytical skills that you gain out of a classroom setting is lost if you do something strictly online. (Interview 5)

The following reservations were expressed by another participant..

I am your biggest advocate of online degrees if it helps someone get the education, the credentialing they need... Then, I would say that there is no difference. But, if I am sitting on the opposite side of the desk and being asked the question of quality of the degree, it may be a different answer. (Interview 1)

Another participant expressed misgivings about academic integrity.

I think that the perception is...you could have five of your best friends sitting around you giving you the answers to the test or that you're cheating by using your book and that there is no good-hearted individual. (Interview 3)

The quality of online education as compared to traditional education is not an easy comparison. Many factors enter into the assessment. Some of them are based on concrete issues such as those listed above, and some of them are based on more marginal factors.

Whatever the state of opinion held today, it is clear that personal experience with

online education had positively influenced the perceptions of those involved in this study. Three of the participants stated that if asked a few years ago whether online education is a quality educational experience, the answer would have been no. However, due to their personal experiences, they now see it in a new light.

If you [would have asked] me a few years ago, “Would I be in favor of it?” Being somebody who...experienced a traditional education, I would sit here and tell you “no way in the world.” But, as you mature a little bit, when you look at it, you think it is a good option. (Interview 4)

If you asked me five years ago, I would have said they were not as good. My experience with them proves otherwise. (Interview 6)

But, because of my experience, I know there are all types of ways to get your degree, and it’s really about the learning the [person] has. (Interview 2)

Those who had little experience tended to be more skeptical of online education. One participant said that the biggest challenge facing online education is trying to get a person to accept something that is different.

According to four of the participants, much of the perception of online education is built on prestige. Those having less experience with online education may view it as inferior based on a social hierarchy.

I would guess that today...there is a kind of hierarchy in people’s head. You’ve got pursuing an associate degree, pursuing an online degree, pursuing a traditional degree... Then you start talking about perceptions of qualities within schools. I would not be surprised if there still wasn’t a bit of a perception that it’s not quite the same. (Interview 1)

I think name recognition and credibility in education, it kind of goes hand-in-hand even though a university's online program could be horrible. But, if they have the name recognition, it lends credibility. (Interview 2)

I don't know that [the university's prestige] would clearly overcome the negative perception. There is something to be said for college life, and so many people have lived it.

Yes, the mystique comes in. My mindset also is that I've got two children. I'm saving for college, and my whole mindset—I hate to admit it—is the old traditional thing. (Interview 4)

Overcoming these social barriers may prove to be the most difficult challenge for online educators.

All participants agreed that a mixture of online and traditional education is probably the best approach. As stated in question three, "...some people do better in the classroom, and some people do better outside of the classroom" (Interview 3). One participant pointed out the positive experiences that can be gained through each method. She sees online education as valuable in fostering self-motivation and traditional education as valuable in fostering teambuilding and networking. Another participant agrees.

Now, do I think it is good to have a mixture? Definitely, because online you learn to self-motivate. You learn a deadline... Whenever you're in a classroom setting and you have people asking questions about a particular topic that generates other questions about that topic, you learn much more. (Interview 5)

A hybrid approach has the potential to create a much more diverse learning experience,

according to the participant. As stated in an earlier question, online education is a single tool within a larger pool of tools for educators (Interview 1).

Non-profit vs. For-profit Education

The perception of online education is further complicated by the fact that one can get an online degree from a non-profit or a for-profit institution. The quality of these two institutions was seen from a different perspective. One participant explained that for-profit universities operate from an entirely different perspective. He explains that a for-profit university is often seen as a way of obtaining the minimum qualifications required to get a foot in the door (Interview 1). Another participant likened for-profit institutions to a drive-through program (Interview 5). Three other participants made the following comments.

There are so many colleges focusing on accelerated-type programs. I think we lose. You get the drive-through education mentality. How much can you learn in a 6-week timeframe? I don't care how long you're in class. You might be in class a little longer, but how much can you really learn because what you're really focusing on is just getting it done. (Interview 6)

I can't tell you the University of Phoenix is a good or a bad degree, but I can tell you the perception from most hiring managers is that it is not a great degree. (Interview 3)

...say they come across and say, "Here's my degree from Phoenix." I probably would inquire more about that education at that interview just for, probably, a better understanding. (Interview 1)

It all comes down to reputation, one of the participants said. For-profit institutions do not

have the positive reputation as non-profit institutions. (Interview 5)

That is not to say that this perception is not unfair, another participant said. “If I think that someone has a University X degree or a University Y degree versus a University of Phoenix, I’m probably going to favor the traditional, probably, and that may not be fair...” (Interview 6). Two of the participants qualified their unfavorable responses by explaining that non-profit institutions and for-profit institutions have a different faculty base, which creates a different mission.

...some of the people I know that are instructors [in a for-profit institution] have a day job, 8 to 5. They may be engineers, versus someone who had dedicated their life to education. (Interview 6)

I perceive that there is probably more rigor in the non-profit programs than some of the for-profit programs. ...the coursework is going to be slightly different [at a non-profit institution] because there are going to be professors who are reviewing that material who are trying to maintain the integrity of their degrees. I feel a little better because there is going to be somebody reviewing who has a vested interest in keeping those programs similar. (Interview 2)

Even though the perception about the quality of for-profit institutions was not as good as the perception about the quality received from a non-profit institution, the continuing education packages offered to employees within each of the companies does not distinguish between the two. “No,” one participant said, “they don’t differentiate between University of Phoenix and or an OU” (Interview 6). All participants stated that as long as the institution is accredited, tuition reimbursement can be applied for coursework from either a for-profit or a non-profit institution.

Local Online Educational Opportunities

Outside of the college fairs held at each company, interviewees stated that they do not proactively investigate what online programs are available in the area.

I'm not familiar with what's exactly available through online as far as a full degree program. (Interview 5)

So, as far as keeping up with the different higher ed facilities here that do online education, this company doesn't really go out and actually investigate. (Interview 4)

The college fair has become the primary mode of delivering information about educational opportunities in the area. Through this method, the companies have built relationships with the university systems. "We have some contacts at some of the local universities--St. Gregory's specifically, but other universities where we invite them to come in and explain their programs to the students," an interviewee explained (Interview 2).

Marketing's Influence

Regardless of the medium used for marketing online education, most participants agreed that the online options that are garnering the most attention are the for-profit, accelerated programs. The marketing approaches that seem to be working push convenience for the busy, working adult—programs that focus on acceleration and flexibility. However, many of these programs come from for-profit institutions, which have the biggest hurdle in overcoming negative perceptions.

Websites, glossy brochures, television, and radio are all effective media depending on the targeted audience. The key is catering to the right audience said two

participants.

A lot of people, as you know, have families. It's hard to go and sit in a class five hours a night or five days a week. I think if it was more publicized, especially in the [local] market—[the local market] being more of a family community—I think there would be a better response [to online education]. (Interview 6)

So, I think from a marketing perspective...you are going to get the 40 to 55 year old in a different medium than you are going to get the 10 to 20... I've seen everything on billboards and those things. ...to me, I think the most effective thing is if you could get something across to folks to let them know that they can...graduate faster. (Interview 3)

Interviewee 6 also pointed out that institutions should definitely keep working with companies on an individual basis. "I think you would get more bang for your buck, if you will, by working it through the larger companies," she said.

Impact of Experience

One of the major influences on the perceptions of interviewees was the corporate training programs offered at their companies. All of the participating companies require staff to complete professional development courses online. These courses range from sexual harassment to specific technical training. "We do require people to get X amount of education a year. It is built into their performance. The balance you get here; it's definitely a very well received program," said one participant (Interview 4). Two other participants said:

We actually require that certain level of managers and above in our company take an online harassment course to understand the different levels of harassment and

how issues should be treated... (Interview 3)

We do a lot of things online here as far as internal employee education-- professional development, required courses. We have e-learning capabilities with a lot of things we do. (Interview 5)

These types of corporate programs had helped increase participants' exposure to online education. As stated in question five, participants stated that their perception of online education had been influenced by the amount of exposure they have had.

Online Education's Appealing and Unappealing Aspects

One significant perspective emerged when participants were asked about the appealing aspects of online education. Individual convenience was mentioned more times than any other appealing factor. "The thing is, from what I've seen in my experience, you have more opportunities for flexibility with online," one participant explained (Interview 6). Two other participants said:

You hear about it more as being an opportunity for somebody to obtain a degree or obtain additional degrees while still being able to work—not having to be away from your job or family. It is similar to a lot of things we are hearing from employees as far as what they want—telecommuting, flexibility about certain things. (Interview 5)

There are a lot of demands in life—family demands, children, spouse, keeping up with elderly parents... It makes it very, very convenient. (Interview 4)

Other appealing aspects stated were specifically from the company, rather than individual, perspective. These factors included the ability to maintain a full-time workforce while extending the educational base of current employees, create professional

development programs that are cost-effective, increase employees' exposure to technology, and develop employee skills in areas not available in the local market.

A significant perspective also emerged when participants were asked about the unappealing aspects of online education. According to four participants, the lack of personal interaction is the most unappealing factor.

The unappealing is that you still miss out on a number of things that [you] would gain from a traditional [program]—things that could be used in the company—teambuilding, the analytical skills, group work, the networking—all of those that you gain by actually sitting with people. (Interview 5)

Some people will need that—they will want to go to a classroom and have that dialogue with a classroom or an instructor or maybe be able to do a sidebar with the instructor after class. (Interview 6)

As hard as you try, you miss the sense of community through the chat rooms or whatever. (Interview 1)

I think you do gain something in some face-to-face engagements in the classroom with your peers. (Interview 2)

Another unappealing aspect of online education for employers was the uncertainty about credible programs created in the online educational world.

Unappealing, as an employer, its knowledge of the universities. We really don't know what programs are the best. As you're interviewing someone or you're reviewing résumés, and they may have a degree from somewhere. You may have to do just a little more research to try to find out what that university is about, where it is, what the history of it is. (Interview 2)

These unappealing factors had a considerable impact on the perception of online education.

Online Education's Impact on the Interview Process

None of the participating companies had policies that distinguish between online degrees and traditional degrees. In fact, none of the interviewees had ever deliberately asked about online education in an interview. "Never brought that out in an interview. Never even thought down that line unless it has come to the attention that it was an online degree," said one interviewee (Interview 4). Two other interviewees added:

I think if someone were to come in today and interview with me and said 100% of my education is online versus going and sitting in a lecture. You know, would I take that into consideration, probably not. I don't know that that would matter to me. (Interview 6)

It doesn't necessarily come up right off the bat. You know, how did you get your degree? It's that you have this degree. This job requires a degree, and you have it. (Interview 5)

However, if the subject of online coursework were to come up throughout the interview process, three participants expressed a desire to delve more deeply into the question.

If you told me that, I might be intrigued and might ask more questions, but as you go through the interview process, everyone is going to have the same assumption. They are going to look at you as though you physically went to school there because they don't know any better. That forces their perception to be what you want it to be. (Interview 3)

I would probably ask questions to really determine what they had learned and

what they had gained from that program. I would have to talk to the individual about the applicability of what they have learned. (Interview 2)

One participant described two instances where applicants she interviewed acquired at least part of their coursework online.

As the conversation went on, he revealed that he got his degree online. He had his master's degree—MBA online from Phoenix... I felt some hesitation from him. I asked him about that, he said he was afraid how I might view his online education at Phoenix. I said, you know, I never thought about it before—being a positive or a negative. (Interview 6)

She did two years of classroom and two years online... She said she was able to focus more and learn more, she felt like... We talked about the differences. It was very interesting talking to her. (Interview 6)

The first interviewee did not get the job, but it was not due to his online degree. The second interviewee was hired, but the decision was not based on the fact that she did have an online education.

The same participant also pointed out that the type of degree earned online had some bearing on the consideration given to an applicant. She said, "...and maybe that depends on the degree. From a business standpoint, getting a business degree online versus an engineering degree online is going to make a difference" (Interview 6).

When asked if he felt it will ever be likely that employers become concerned that online education be marked on diplomas, one participant said only if the perception that one was inferior and one superior became widely accepted (Interview 1). Another participant expressed concerns about discrimination. "I think that if there was enough

data out there, somebody could make a case that they were discriminated against because of the fact that they had an online education or online degree, and they were just as qualified as the next person” (Interview 3).

Online Education’s Impact on Hiring Processes

Although an individual with an online degree would not be tossed out solely for that reason, the subject of online degrees was likely to challenge some hiring managers, forcing them to ask what it means to have online credentials. One participant had the following reaction:

That would probably be a challenge for that person because it would force the hiring manager to think, “What the heck does that mean?” (Interview 3)

Three other interviewees had similar reactions.

I think the less educated interviewer may [be negatively influenced by the fact that a potential employee has an online education]. And I say educated, and I mean educated in online or non-traditional degree programs may have a tendency [abstain from hiring a person with an online degree or coursework]. (Interview 2)

I can see it being an issue with some people I work with... I think the difference is experience [with the online educational format]. (Interview 6)

If I’ve got all else being equal 100%, and one has a degree from a traditional education facility, they might get a little more weight than the other. (Interview 5)

These comments link back to question five where it was stated that people associate quality with familiarity. If a person has experienced a certain type of educational delivery mechanism, he/she is more likely to associate quality with similar forms of delivery because they understand how it works.

Three participants agreed that in any hiring opportunity, it is a combination of things that come into play. Judging solely on the basis of degree was not standard practice.

As interviewers, we're trying to get better at trying to grasp what the person learned and how that is applicable to what they need to do. It's more of a relevance... (Interview 2)

When an application comes in or someone applies online, the recruiters will look at does the persona meet the qualifications of the job because the job posting is going to list the minimum qualifications. And it's going to be a degree and some experience, or it may be that that person's experience offsets the degree and experience requirement. We do that formula as well. (Interview 5)

I'm probably going to investigate him a lot [if he has an online degree or coursework]. I say this because, I don't know if online is the best way to go if you are going for some more specialized degree. (Interview 6)

The interview allows the hiring manager to assess the level of importance that should be placed on one's educational experience, personal experience, and even company fit.

Summary

Representatives from six service-type companies participated in the study. Participants were asked questions designed to collect information about their perceptions of online education. The questions revealed that the participants had a considerable amount of responsibility for the hiring process within their department or within the company as a whole. Participants acquired most of their personal experience with online education through corporate educational programs. Other exposures include family,

friends, and advertisements, as indicated in question nine.

Participants had a strong knowledge about the components of online education and variation in the application of these components in the online environment. This led them to believe that the future role of online education, as indicated in question four, is bright. All participants believed that it will continue grow. However, they do not feel it would become the dominate approach to education.

Participants do not feel online education is seen as equal to traditional education yet. The participants had both positive and negative things to say about online education. The conclusions were not clear cut, but it was clear that participants prefer a mixed approach to education. They were also more comfortable with non-profit, online programs than for-profit programs.

Participants revealed, in question seven, they had a lack of knowledge about online programs in the area. The reason for that may come from question eight, which revealed marketing approaches were not reaching them.

When asked whether or not an applicant's online education had a bearing on the hiring process, participants suggested a small bit of bias. However, they indicated that it is the total person, not the degree that they hire.

Upon completion of the interviews, several themes emerged during analysis. These themes are discussed in Chapter V.

Chapter V – Analysis of Data

Chapter V contains references to literature, artifacts, and field notes; direct quotes from interviews; and researcher analysis. The direct quotes and references to artifacts and field notes serve to remind the reader of the material previously presented in Chapter IV – Data Presentation. Because the elements within the analysis are interwoven, no separate discussion section is presented. Instead, analytical material is presented in conjunction with the quotes and references. Interweaving these elements within the analysis creates a unifying effect that produces a more comprehensive look at the information gathered in this study. It also prevents the necessity of looking back at Chapter IV when reading the analysis.

The purpose of this study was to explore employers' perceptions of online education and to identify the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions. Pile sorting produced 10 common themes from the interviews, artifacts, and field notes. The analysis is presented in the following order, with the themes (bulleted items) placed under the correlating topic related to the research questions.

Online vs. Traditional Education

- Online Education Is Convenient, but It Lacks Interactivity
- Online Education Increases Student Responsibility
- Participants Prefer a Hybrid or Mixed Media Approach
- The Future of Online Education is Positive

Non-profit vs. For-profit, Online Education

- For-profit and Non-profit Educational Institutions have Different Missions

Online Education's Impact on Interview and Hiring Practices

- Online Education Impacts the Hiring Processes
- Diploma Classifications for Online Education are not Needed

The Impact of Advertisement and Experience on Perceptions

- Personal Experience Positively Impacts Perceptions
- Society has an Impact on Perceptions
- Public Advertising is not Capturing Attention

Mere Exposure Theory was used as a lens when analyzing the themes related to the participants' exposure to and understanding of online education. Outcomes related to the theory's usefulness as a lens for the study of employers' perceptions are also interwoven into the analysis of this chapter.

Following the presentation of the themes are sections for implications, conclusions, limitations, suggestions for future research, and commentary. The implications section is divided into research, practice, and theory. The commentary relates a personal experience I had when serving on a hiring committee for a university that occurred during the course of my dissertation research.

Themes

Online vs. Traditional Education

How do employers perceive the quality of online coursework and/or degrees in comparison to more traditional education? Although the participants had some reservations about the lack of face-to-face interaction provided by online education, they had a favorable

view of its contribution to higher education today and in the future. They said it is a convenient way for busy adults to complete their degrees. They also said online education promotes a form of student responsibility that traditional forms of education do not and promotes the acquisition of technological skills. Overall, the participants believed the outlook for online education is bright, especially when designing programs that utilize a hybrid or mixed method approach.

Online education is convenient, but it lacks interactivity. Participants in the study recognized that online education has both positive and negative aspects. They listed convenience as the most positive aspect and lack of interaction as the most negative. Logistically, online education is convenient for both individuals and corporations, reported two participants. It helps corporations save on travel expenses paid to employees traveling long distances to attend classes. “I think the companies internally are using [online training] because it’s especially logistically convenient for the workforce that is spread out” said one participant (Interview 5). “[Online training] allows you, as a company, to get a class or get information out to the masses” said another. “You don’t have to have a facilitator flying all over the place” (Interview 3).

Their perceptions align with past research on the attitudes toward online education held by students. A study at the Federal University of Sao Paulo that investigated the attitudes medical students have toward online education reported freedom in scheduling as the most positive aspect and lack of personal contact as the most negative (Bernardo et al., 2004).

Aside from helping corporations meet logistical needs, participants said online education helps companies maintain full-time employees while furthering the educational

base of their workforce. Online education allows a company to maintain full-time employees while reaping knowledge gains through continuing education, explained one participant (Interview 5). The ability to sustain a complete workforce while achieving corporate goals can be an attractive incentive for corporation to encourage the use of online education.

Today's global market is highly competitive. The implications of a highly competitive market are far reaching. Cost efficiency and increasing the company's knowledge base can be strong selling points for college and university recruiters who want to expand online education. Knowing how corporations feel about the cost-saving and performance-raising benefits of online education can help recruiters and other higher education professionals as they plan strategies for increasing the marketability and quality of online education.

According to all participants, online education is particularly appealing because it is convenient for busy adults. It allows them the opportunity to attend classes from the comfort of their own home, providing them with a schedule that meets family needs and creates less stress because it cuts down on their time away from home. "In an online program, you can be anywhere and complete your coursework" one of the participants said. "You don't have to be in class on Thursday at 6:00 or every Tuesday and Thursday from 10:30 to 11:55" (Interview 2). Another said online education is great for adults because it is a "work-at-your-own-pace" environment, which aids adults when trying to schedule around their busy lives (Interview 3).

This convenience or flexibility factor seems to have had a positive influence on the participants' perceptions of online education.

I, [as an administrator in this company], am [a big] advocate of online degrees if it helps [employees] get the education [or] the credentialing they need to continue not only [learning] for the sake of learning but to meet whatever their [career] goals are. (Interview 1)

Without the convenience online education offers, several of the participants said some adult students would not have the opportunity to continue their education. This is of concern to companies in view of the impact an employee's educational attainment has on the company's bottom line. A lack of educational opportunity can reduce a company's ability to expand their corporate knowledge base, leaving them vulnerable to competition. It can also limit an individual's ability to prove his/her worth in the marketplace. Institutions that strive to offer new and inventive educational avenues can have a tremendous impact the local and global economies.

According to the literature reviewed in this study, occupations in Western cultures are closely linked to social and economic status. In fact, the chief determinant of job status is education level (Lenski, 1966; Mills & Hans, 1953; Weber, 1947). Phillips (2004) states that online education is the answer for working adults who want to achieve higher economic status. In today's advanced technological age, educational attainment is more critical than ever before. As stated on the participating companies' websites, a "global" marketplace is important to success.

This increase in the global market has significant implications for higher education professionals who plan online programs. Online education is exploding, which is creating a fertile ground for higher education institutions that can support online programs (Newman, 2005). However, too much explosion can create saturated markets that cannot be sustained.

It is up to institutions of higher education to create a controlled explosion that is capable of being managed while, at the same time, expanding to meet the needs of students and corporations.

Although convenient, participants believed that online education lacks interaction. Participants felt a lack of interaction between students and professors inhibits the learning process. It eliminates spontaneous debate, eye-to-eye contact, and the ability to receive immediate feedback. One participant listed several skills that are better obtained in the traditional rather than the online classroom.

To actually go to class, I think, gives you additional learning opportunities that you lose online. I think it's not necessarily a good thing. Learning to work in groups, learning to focus in that type of environment, the networking, the teambuilding, the analytical skills that you gain out of a classroom setting is lost.

(Interview 5)

This revelation is consistent with the literature in the field. According to Berg (2002) lack of interaction in online education has been a long-standing complaint of students as well. He says the design of self-study has historically precluded interaction between professors and students and is one of the biggest reasons for negative opinions of online education. However, four of the participants were also quick to point out that individual attention is sometimes a matter of personal preference.

...[Some people] want to go to a classroom and have that dialogue with a classroom or an instructor or maybe be able to do a sidebar with the instructor after class. Some people need that, and some people do not. (Interview 4)

Some people are well suited for the online environment, and some people are not, they

implied.

Even though the participants in this study felt online education had some limitations and disadvantages, they confirmed that online education is a valuable educational opportunity for many students.

[Students] realize that you may lose something with the eye-to-eye contact with the professor, but the content is the same. It still only matters what [the student does] with the content--after [he/she] get[s] the knowledge, how [they] transfer that into skills and behavior. I think people's minds are starting to shift because economically, [online education is] just affordable. (Interview 2)

Other participants offered solutions for increasing interaction through the use of technology.

I've taken a few online classes, and you do miss some of [the face-to-face interaction]... There are ways to create programs using interaction and video and those sorts of things to enhance that. (Interview 4)

In fact, all participants said multimedia components have the ability to aid in the interactivity of the online environment. When asked what components make up a more interactive environment, participants listed discussion groups, multimedia, and chat rooms.

The literature reviewed in this study supports the participants' observations. In a commentary, Berg (2002) says professors and course designers who have low concern for interactivity have failed to evolve their pedagogical approaches. He believes it is possible to build a sense of community in the online environment.

Never before has it been possible for distance education to reach such heights of

interactivity. The literature reveals that there is no better time for higher education to embrace the opportunity to reach out to new groups of students through online education (Nasseh). However, higher education administrators and online education designers should take heed before investing in a great number of virtual environments. They should take time to create interactive environments that include various multimedia components and develop a skilled professor base that embraces the use of new technologies. Without professors who are willing to expand their technology skills, online programs will not thrive.

Higher education professionals and course designers should also keep their audience in mind when building these environments. As three participants in this study stated, the attitude and ability of the student make a difference in how much he/she learns, regardless of the educational setting. Building a truly valuable online program will take a multifaceted approach, one that incorporates progressive technologies and has support from administration, faculty, staff, and students.

Online education increases student responsibility. Regardless of the learning environment, three participants said it is up to the student to foster learning. Students are ultimately responsible for what and how much they take away from a class and how they apply what they have learned in real-world situations, they said.

From my experience, it doesn't matter if you are in a traditional setting or somewhere online, it is really the engagement of the student and the material--their interaction with their peers and the instructor.... We have plenty of social loafers in the traditional programs [too]...., one interviewee said (Interview 2)

It's not big-brother syndrome where the teacher is making sure you are in class...

We are all adults, you know? You should hold yourself accountable for being there or not being there, expressed another. (Interview 5)

In an online environment, the responsibility for learning is higher for the learner than in a traditional setting. Participants cautioned that some people are better suited for the online environment than others. “Some people do better in the classroom, and some people do better outside of the classroom” said one interviewee (Interview 3). ...Not everybody learns the same way” said another. “Some are, you know, auditory versus actually reading it. So you have to have the flexibility in your programs to account for those learners—learning styles—all learners,” she explained (Interview 5). Their comments can be traced to the literature in this study.

In the literature, higher education professionals are cautioned to take into account the needs of learners who are typically drawn to online education (Long, 2000). Many are busy working adults who may be more critical of the online class design. Non-traditional students are typically paying for their education themselves or their employers are footing the bill. Therefore, they are more likely to be critical of educational options and may be prone to shopping around (Long, 2000). The inference for online program designers is to create programs that fulfill convenience needs for students without compromising quality. Designers would do well to keep in mind the literature on the subject that suggest a mixed or hybrid approach to online education is the best way to meet the needs of a broad student body (Bernardo et al., 2004; Meyer, 2002;).

Participants prefer a hybrid or mixed media approach. Three participants in this study recommended a hybrid approach for providing the best possible education. One participant said:

It would seem to me that [online education] is--and this is just my opinion--not in and of itself the primary educational delivery tool. I think it becomes one of many tools in the toolbox that the university has that fits the students' needs and perhaps, employer's needs too. (Interview 1)

Another said:

I think a mixture is better. I don't necessarily agree with 100% of traditional or 100% online because you lose so much from those settings. (Interview 5)

These comments are consistent with literature on student attitudes toward online education. Meyer (2002) quotes a study by Campos and Harasim that found 55% of students preferred a mixture of face-to-face and online in the curriculum. In another study at Federal University of Sao Paulo, 81.8% of the medical students surveyed said they would apply for a hybrid program, and only 3% said they would apply for an all-online program (Bernardo et al., 2004).

Two participants of this study listed specific benefits achieved through engagement in online rather than traditional methods of educational delivery. They included self-motivation, dedication, and increased technology skills. One participant explained:

Online you learn to self-motivate. You have to study, and you have to initiate that getting it done. You learn the deadline. You're held accountable for that deadline, said one participant. (Interview 5)

Another said:

[Students in online environments know they] don't always have to be in the classroom... So you have a different kind of learner who's okay if they have to

go to say a web-based learning or something like that. They have more familiarity with those kinds of things, said another. (Interview 2)

Their remarks are consistent with a study completed by Krentler and Willis-Flurry in 2005. The results show that regardless of the students' Internet experience, the use of technology had significant positive effects on learning. In a study by Kuh and Vesper that analyzed 125,224 undergraduates, positive writing and problem solving gains from self-directed learning were reported (Meyer, 2002).

However, closer inspection of these comments reveals that the participants may have an outdated view of the current "traditional" education model. The participants seem to view traditional education as a strictly face-to-face approach. They stated that the ideal educational model would use a hybrid approach—traditional and online. However, in a rapidly increasing number of today's colleges and universities, the traditional educational approach already mirrors what the participants conceive of as a hybrid approach. Many universities require an online component to the traditional, face-to-face courses. Students attend class physically as well as use online tools such as Blackboard or WebCT to engage in off-site discussions, communicate with professors, and deliver completed assignments (Bernardo et al., 2004; Changing landscape, 2000; Meyer, 2002; Newman, 2001; Potashnik, 1998).

Had the participants of this study been provided with a current definition of traditional and online education, their conclusions may have been different. The implication is that higher education professionals need to do a better job of updating the public's perception of traditional education. They need to educate the public about the changes that have taken place within the brick-and-mortar environment as a result of new

technologies.

For online education to work, participants believed that the virtual environment must be a mixture of components. All participants described successful online corporate training tools used within their companies. Two participants suggested the following technological mechanisms for making online environments more attractive to learners and companies.

[Our company has] multiple [online training programs]—you've got interaction, you've got video... There are some really good ones. [The designers] have done a really good job in developing. Some of [the programs] are pretty simple, pretty basic, but some of them are very interactive. (Interview 4)

Someone will do the training and record it. Then, I go [online] and listen to it at my own pace. So, it is kind of like my iPod. I can go out there and listen to it to a certain point, and then I have to take a call or leave. When I come back, it will pick up right where I stopped. (Interview 6)

[Online education] could be a mix. It's a wide array of things.

As is consistent with literature (Meyer, 2002), these online environments should grow with the changing technologies and provide new and more effective ways to provide education (Interview 3).

One possible implication for higher education professionals related to the participants' comments is to make sure there is fluidity in the educational environment. Businesses are typically more fluid than educational institutions. They often change technologies more quickly than colleges and universities. For higher education professionals to make strides in meeting the needs of the quick paced corporate market, it

is important they increase their own fluidity. This means creating growth plans that allow for quick upgrades in hardware and training for those involved in the delivery of online education, including professors.

The future of online education is positive. According to the literature reviewed in this study, Potashnik (1998) predicted distance education would increase as markets became more global, and it would create new alliances between educational institutions, businesses, and governments. Today, the participants of this study are realizing these predictions. They envision a bright future for online education. They forecasted growth in remote outreach, programs for working adults, and specialized programs that meet the needs unique markets. Four interviewees had the following reactions:

I think because of the limited number of degrees that you can get from local universities, people will start to take advantage of more programs that may be out of our geographical area because people have educational pursuits that are not provided at University X, Y, or Z. (Interview 2)

Since technology is increasing tremendously, I think online education is just going to become more refined, more enhanced, more wide spread, more things to choose from, allowing people a much greater access to information. I think thus, allowing...whether it's colleges, universities, or trade school, or whatever...an opportunity to provide things they couldn't do before because from a cost effective nature. (Interview 3)

I would hope it would grow with technology and become more accessible. (Interview 6)

I can't imagine that it is going away. I can't imagine that it is not going to

become a more dominant factor in pursuing whatever that degree might be.

(Interview 1)

These comments are in alignment with the literature reviewed in this study that discusses the continued growth of online education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000-2001). The comments also aligned with literature related to the appeal of online education for busy, working adults who are often place restricted (Berg, 2002; Ligos, 2000).

A student's personal goals do not always correspond with program options at local institutions. Online education offers students more variety in degree choice. Local students may go online to find degree programs that fit their specific needs. This often creates serious revenue and population losses for local universities that are not in the position to offer online options. To protect themselves, it is important for institutions to equalize their student body by providing online programs to those outside the local area.

From the perspective of the participants in this study, two areas within online education that corporations are enthusiastically embracing are corporate training and continuing education for employees. All participations in this study stated that their companies offer professional development programs for employees. These programs provide a wide array of options for the delivery of mass amounts of information to employees and to increase specific skills related to the individual company. One participant said:

[A team from our company is] going directly [to Argentina], hire a leadership team and start hiring college educated individuals to bring them into our environment to train them. [The hires] are going to come to us with that higher education already. Then, how do we supplement that with the areas of need that

they may not get from that general education? (Interview 4)

Two others added:

We have a pretty extensive library, if you will, to pick from in terms of online training. (Interview 6)

We actually require that a certain level of managers and above in our company take an online harassment course to understand the different levels of harassment and how issues should be treated appropriately. (Interview 3)

This trend can also be seen in current literature. The use of online training is a growing movement in both the corporate and small business world (Zager, 2001). With the availability of more online education, colleges and universities must fight to keep the local student, while also trying to attract a world-wide student base. It is an important time in the history of higher education. Until online education gains full respect in society, wading into the online ocean can be a risky venture. However, not going into the water at all can be even more risky. Online education offers convenience for students and cost-savings for corporations (Zager, 2001). Institutions that do not offer some form of online education miss out on a growing student base and the revenue that accompanies online expansion.

According to one of the participants, the desire for convenience, flexibility, and cost savings through online education stems from an overall trend in the workforce. More and more employees want flexibility in the workplace, she said. They want the “ability to telecommute, that ability to set their own schedule, that ability to decide when they can do their work” (Interview 5). Her comments have great importance for higher education professionals. They highlight a trend that can benefit higher education

professionals as they strive to meet the expectations of today's working adults.

For educational requirements that cannot be met through internal corporate training, all participants said their companies offer tuition reimbursement opportunities to employees who want to further their knowledge and skills. None of the companies have policies that dictate to employees which institutions to attend. In fact, one of the human resources websites had a link to The University of Phoenix on their job posting pages. Another had a list of local and regional universities. The participants said their companies do not have restrictions on type of institution or type of program. "It doesn't matter to us where they go," said one participant (Interview 3). "It's just these are the dollars we as a company allocate," he explained. "We just don't get in the business of directing people," said another (Interview 1). "Our platform is—100% believe in continued development, professionally, academically. Here are the tools we will make available to you, so within these guidelines, you make your choice, he said. A third participant said that his company does not recommend university programs. They just present possibilities to employees (Interview 2). One participant even stated that they do not differentiate between the University of Phoenix and non-profit, traditional programs. "The only restrictions placed on the programs are accreditation and scope," she said (Interview 6)

These two stipulations—accreditation and scope—link back to earlier comments made by participants when discussing the importance of accreditation. As the literature reveals, many diploma mills advertise accreditation. Unfortunately, many of the accreditations are not valid (Phillips, 2004). The false advertisement of accreditation is confusing to consumers who are seeking legitimate online programs. The assertion is

that colleges and universities must work hard to help educate the public about proper accreditation processes and organizations.

Another benefit of online education for corporations is the ability to increase its knowledge base without having to sacrifice its full-time employee numbers.

From an employer's standpoint, [online education is] probably...it's a way for you to still maintain that full-time employee and reap the benefits of them actually obtaining or furthering their education--without losing them during the work day.

(Interview 5)

With an evolving knowledge base, a company becomes more competitive in its field. Online educational opportunities may also serve to create a more positive working environment by helping individuals meet personal as well as company goals. As stated on many of the company websites, support for personal goals is important. These revelations support the notion that higher education professionals need to keep corporate needs in mind when designing online education opportunities. Corporations have specific requirements. Aligning online programs with local needs could ensure an enrollment base for universities.

Non-profit vs. For-profit, Online Education

What differences do employers perceive between non-profit institutions that offer online coursework and for-profit institutions that offer online coursework? The conclusions drawn from the interviews for this study reveal that participants do perceive a difference between for-profit and non-profit institutions. However, they seem to accept the differences in light of their belief that the two institutional types do not share the same mission. As discussed in more detail later in this section, participants saw for-profit institutions as a "fast food" form

of education, while non-profit institutions as a more well rounded opportunity.

For-profit and non-profit institutions have different missions. As noted earlier, the literature in this study reveals that for-profit, online institutions are a convenient way for busy adults to complete their education. This is consistent with literature on the subject. In addition, Sperling and Tucker state that for-profit institutions offer other benefits as well (Berg, 2002). For-profit institutions require less funding from state and federal governments, support local communities by renting commercial office space, relate well with other for-profit business, and respond more quickly to changing markets than traditional institutions, they contend. Regardless, in the eyes of the participants of this study, online, for-profit education and online, non-profit education were still not seen equal.

There are many reasons for this viewpoint, but the main reason may be that, "...[for-profit and non-profit] universities are operating from different perspectives" (Interview 1).

...[private universities are] focusing on the working adult. "You didn't think you could go back to school. Hey, now we are saying you can." Just give us one night a week for 6 to 8 weeks, or whatever the case may be. (Interview 5)

For-profit degrees were seen as a way for individuals to open doors. They were not necessarily seen as being as rigorous or robust as traditional degrees. One participant said:

[Online education] is probably not viewed as yet being as robust a learning experience as a traditional classroom environment where you are not only face-to-face with the instructor and the learning experience, but you are also part of a community. (Interview 1)

Another participant said:

I perceive that there is probably more rigor in the non-profit programs than some of the for-profit programs. (Interview 2)

For-profit universities were also seen as the “fast food” version of education, where everything is built on acceleration. One participant wondered how much can actually be learned in a six-week timeframe. “You might be in class a little longer [for each session in a six-week course], but how much can you really learn because what you’re really focusing on is just getting it done” she said (Interview 5).

Participants of this study also saw a significant difference between the professors at for-profit and non-profit institutions. Two participants felt that faculty members on traditional university campuses command more prestige because they are perceived as being more dedicated to education.

Some people I know that are instructors [at for-profit, online institutions] have day jobs—8 to 5. They may be an engineer versus [a professor on a traditional campus] who has dedicated their life to education. I’m going to say that [the traditional professors] are going to be more vested in making sure that student knows what is going on. (Interview 6)

...the coursework [at traditional institutions] is going to be slightly different because there are going to be professors who are reviewing that material who are trying to maintain the integrity of their degrees. There’s some check to keep everything in balance. (Interview 2)

These comments can be linked to past literature. In a study conducted in 1999, participants were asked whether they felt that an increase in e-courses means a decrease

in the importance of the traditional university professor. The study reported that 65.9% of respondents do not feel that the importance of the traditional professor will decrease with the increase in e-courses (Saunders, G. & Weible).

The lesson students, corporations, and institutions of higher education should take away from these revelations is to keep the mission of the institution in mind when assessing the value of an online degree programs. Concentration should be paid to matching the desired outcome and specific needs of the student or corporation with the avenue for best reaching those needs. As discussed in an earlier theme, convenience is important for adults. Maybe students and corporations should not focus so much on prestige and focus more on defining the best avenue for reaching specific educational goals. Doing this may diminish the value of prestige and direct evaluation toward personal outcomes instead.

According to the literature in this study, a major stumbling block for commercial institutions is prestige (Ligos, 2000). The lack of prestige in for-profit institutions may give non-profit institutions the upper hand in a world of increasing for-profit competition. However, there is room in the educational arena for all types of education. For students who are not concerned with prestige, for-profit institutions may be the perfect fit. Those who are more concerned with prestige may feel more comfortable taking an online class from an established, traditional institution. The job of the higher education professional is to develop products that match the needs and concerns of their target audience.

Online Education's Impact on Interview and Hiring Practices

What concerns do employers have about the educational path of their potential employees, and how do these concerns impact the hiring process? The increase in online

education is impacting the hiring process. It is creating extra work for hiring managers because they are not as familiar with online institutions as they are with traditional institutions. Therefore, they must do more investigative work when assessing the value of a potential employee's education.

Currently, participants stated that the changes on the hiring processes are not so great that participants felt the need for online descriptors on diplomas and transcripts. However, it opens up a dialogue that may have a tremendous effect on the meaning of online credentials in the marketplace.

Online education impacts the hiring processes. According to the participants, online education impacts the hiring process. However, none of the interviewees reported their company policy is to directly ask about online education during interviews with potential employees. "Never brought [online education] out in an interview. Never even thought down that line, unless it has come to the attention that it was an online degree," said one interviewee (Interview 4). Another said:

It might come out, and it likely would in the course of talking about, "I see you have a degree--that you attended University of Oklahoma. Tell me a little bit about that experience." But in terms of specifically, "Was this an online ... We haven't built that into [our policy]. (Interview 1)

Two others added:

I think if someone were to come in today and interview with me and [say] 100% of my education is online versus going and sitting in a lecture, would I take that into consideration, probably not. I don't know that would matter to me.
(Interview 6)

Where [the impact of online education] may become more apparent--or it may become a little more apparent--is when the hiring manager is looking or trying to hire one over another or [deciding] what candidate to interview over another. [It] may come into play there. But, it doesn't necessarily come up right off the bat.

You know, how did you get this degree? (Interview 5)

Just because the question of online education is not approached directly during the interview process, does not mean that participants thought it did not affect the interview process. Increases in online education can produce homework for hiring managers and supervisors, one of the interviewees said (Interview 3).

[Hiring managers] have to do a lot more homework...as you're interviewing someone or you're reviewing resumes... You may have to do just a little more research to try to find out what that university is about—where it is, what the history of it is... (Interview 2)

If revealed through normal interview processes, one participant said, he would be compelled to ask more questions about the education process than if the potential employee had attended a traditional college campus (Interview 3). Three other participants agreed.

I probably would inquire more about that education at that interview just for probably a better understanding... I would probably spend a lot more time, and that person would probably have a very heavy bearing on my overall evaluation of that accreditation. (Interview 4)

I would probably ask questions to really determine what they have learned and what they had gained from that program. (Interview 2)

That would probably be a challenge for that person because it would force that hiring manager to think, “What the heck does that mean?” (Interview 3)

If you told me that, I might be intrigued and might ask more questions.

...I'm probably going to investigate him a lot. I say this because I don't know if online is the best way to go if you are going for some more specialized degree.

(Interview 6)

In the end, the level of impact online education has on an interviewee's chances of obtaining a job may depend on who is doing the interviewing.

Three participants agreed that if a hiring manager or supervisor is not familiar with online education, online credentials could have a significant impact on the final hiring decision. When answering questions about this subject, some participants in this study used body language that indicated displeasure with some of the attitudes their comrades have toward online education. Two participants commented on the effect of their experience on their perceptions.

I can see it being an issue with some people I work with... The difference is my experience. ...I know some managers who have their degree that have not taken one online class. (Interview 6)

I think a less educated interviewer may. I say educated, and I mean educated in online or non-traditional degree programs may have a tendency. Because of my experience, I know there all types of ways to get your degrees. (Interview 2)

Familiarity takes the mystery out of online education. But that does not mean it takes all of the bias out of the equation. One participant admitted that with all things being equal between two applicants, the one with the traditional degree might have a slight advantage

(Interview 5). She shrugged her shoulders when saying this and gestured with her hands, indicating that there is nothing she can do.

The following conclusions can be made. To help ease the burden on hiring managers and supervisors, colleges and universities should focus on creating online programs that legitimize the virtual delivery method. They should also concentrate on marketing the programs to corporations in hopes of creating comfort. Providing employers with easy access to information about how online programs are designed and the level of rigor involved could go a long way in creating a sense of security for hiring managers who encounter individuals with online credentials.

If employers do not achieve a significant level of comfort with online education, they may begin to feel uneasy about online education as a whole. They may collectively begin to doubt the quality of online education. If this happens, employers may begin to demand class distinctions on diplomas between virtual and traditional education, causing higher education professionals to face some tough questions about the hierarchy of credentials in an online world and whether online education will ever achieve the level of acceptance they desire.

Diploma classifications for online education are not needed. Diplomas and transcripts do not state specifically whether a degree or coursework is obtained online. Should they? Are employers concerned with how a diploma reads? Not according to the participants of this study. None of the participating companies had policies that deal directly with online education. Job postings did not make distinctions between degrees obtained online or through traditional coursework. All had equal opportunity statements on their human resources websites. “We don’t distinguish [between traditional and

online degrees]. We say, a four-year degree from a recognized university in the following disciplines,” said one participant (Interview 1). Two other participants said:

I don’t think [human resources staff members] are necessarily concerned with it.

I think that if you have the requirements...a four-year degree or a two-year degree or a bachelor’s, associate’s, or master’s preferred... (Interview 5)

As you go through the interview process, everyone is going to have the same assumption. They are going to look at you as though you physically went to school there because they don’t know any better... (Interview 3)

One participant said that he can only see diploma distinctions becoming an issue if the perception of online education becomes collectively known as inferior within a company or within society (Interview 1). The implication of such a belief is that higher education professionals need to work hard to legitimize the online education format in the corporate world. If hiring managers and supervisors continually find it difficult to assess the value of an online degree, they may eventually surmise that all online programs are suspect and not worth the investigative time.

According to two participants, accreditation from a suitable agency is the leading indicator of the quality of any educational program. It is something they look for when evaluating the worth of a degree. All stated that stipulations on accreditation were placed on continuing education programs within their companies. This point was made in an earlier theme as well. Institutions without accreditation are not legitimate, said one interviewee (Interview 5).

[Higher education institutions] have to be accredited by whatever organization accredits universities in that state [to be considered credible]. (Interview 2)

Without proper accreditation, it does not matter if the degree is obtained online or on a physical campus, it is not accepted in the hiring process or as a continuing education at any of the companies. Therefore, higher education professionals need to secure a strict accreditation system for online programs.

The level of impact online credentials will have on higher education is not yet known. Developing accepted credentials will go a long way in making sure attitudes toward online education are positive. Higher educational professionals have a window of opportunity to create reputable online programs that foster the respect of students and corporations. As mentioned by Interviewee 1, unless online education becomes commonly known as an inferior product, it is assumed to be legitimate. Confirming its legitimacy becomes a crucial element creating collective acceptance.

The Impact of Advertisement and Experience on Perceptions

What effect has the advertisement of online education and concrete exposure to online education (personal or through employee contact) had on employers' perceptions of online education? First, participants said personal experience had the most influence on their forming positive perceptions of online education. They also agreed that social influences may be having a negative impact on the collective opinions about online education. Lastly, they agreed that advertising did not have much of an effect on their opinions.

Personal experience positively impacts perception. All of the participants in the study had personal experience with online education. These personal experiences appeared to have had a positive effect on the participants' perceptions of online education. Three of the interviewees said their perceptions had changed within the past several years due to personal exposure.

...my perception [of online education], say five years ago, is totally different than my perception today. Of course, that comes from the exposure that I have had internally and how much time I have put into the education here. (Interview 4)

If you asked me five years ago, I would have said [online programs] were not as good. My experience with them proves otherwise. (Interview 6)

Because of my experience, I know there are all types of ways to get your degree, and it's really about the learning... (Interview 2)

The changes in their attitudes are a function of constructionism, the theoretical perspective used in this study. The participants' old realities were exchanged for new realities through exposure to online education (Crotty, 2003). Their change of reality may have been aided by their exposure to online education. According to Mere Exposure Theory, exposure to a stimulus makes it less threatening and more approachable (Baker, 1999). The theory may explain how the participants came to construct new realities. The more exposure the participants had to online education, the more accepted it became and the more the participants contemplated the benefits of technology in providing quality educational opportunities. The following four quotes are examples of the positive perceptions of the participants.

I would like to think, and I don't have any reason to think I'm wrong, that the class or the education that you would receive in class from a professor would be the same caliber as the online, except for the debate. (Interview 3)

I suspect [online education] would be very positive and provide a lot of opportunity to those [who] just can't get out and deal the time in those lump sums that you need to go to classes. (Interview 4)

Some people are backward thinking in technology. You have to grow with it. I think someone can get a four-year degree online and have just as good an education as someone going to a classroom for four years. (Interview 6)

The fact that we're leveraging technology appeals to me because we talk about competition in the workplace, technical savvy, and people being able to exchange in that type of environment is a benefit to them when they come into the workplace because they are not afraid of distance learning. (Interview 2)

All six participants received exposure through corporate training. They each had a positive opinion about his or her company's online continuing education programs.

Corporate training is an area where higher education institutions and corporations can work together. Colleges and universities are in the position to produce training programs that are convenient for corporations as well as individual students. In return, higher education professionals can glean information from companies that will help them decide which online programs work best for the community. As stated earlier, aligning educational programs with company needs can create a solid revenue stream for colleges and universities. Achieving the right combination of online and traditional programming takes attention to the employment market and its changing needs.

It seems evident from these disclosures that personal experience had a positive influence on the participants' perception of online education. Because personal experience seems to play a positive role in the formation of perceptions of online education, it is important for higher education professionals to seize every opportunity to meet with corporate leaders to discuss online educational avenues.

Society has an impact on perceptions. Even with the growth of online education

and the positive feelings participants garnered through personal experience, all participants believed that society does not consider online education as prestigious as traditional education. “I think it gets at prestige. Most people are looking for something they are familiar with,” said one participant (Interview 2). Two other participants said:

It just would not surprise me that there is some belief today still that [online education] is not the same learning experience that you get by hoofing it to a university and sitting in a classroom with other people. (Interview 1)

...The biggest challenge is that you are trying to get somebody to accept something that is different. We have that in cultural aspects of things as well that we have to overcome as a society. (Interview 3)

The reason for this lack of social acceptance of online education can be traced back to literature on social hierarchies.

People place a lot of value on education and its power to increase their mobility. As studied by early sociologists, Gerth, Hans, and Mills (1953), after the Industrial Revolution, a shift in society made occupations and education critically important in terms of purchasing and social power. With today’s global economy, the importance placed on education is likely to grow (Potashnik, 1998). As one of the participants said, “Not that you can’t make it in today’s world without a college degree, but you almost have to have a master’s degree to even be in the mix” (Interview 3). This means higher education’s ability to create educational opportunities that are seen as legitimate to society in general is crucial to the future success of online education.

Perceptions of online education are complex. They are not based on a single variable and cannot be changed easily. The perceived lack of prestige for online

education is sometimes due to true inferiority such as a lack of accreditation or validity. One participant had reservations about online education because he thinks it is easy to purchase a fake degree. He told a story about an uncle who actually purchased an online degree. "It blew up in [his uncle's] face," he explained (Interview 4). Another participant also questioned the process of setting up an online degree.

...how easy is it for somebody to just start offering an online program? You can say that you have a bachelor's degree in accounting, and it's not with an accredited institution. That doesn't carry the same weight as somebody from an accredited institution. (Interview 5)

The literature in this study supports their concerns. Sales of fake degrees reached the \$200 million mark worldwide in 2001 (Ezell & Bear, 2005). Phillips (2004), reports that most fake distance education institutions even advertise 100% accreditation. The problem is, the accreditations these agencies advertise are bogus, often created by those running the school. These phony institutions have a negative effect on the reputation of all online programs.

Specific requirements for the accreditation of online programs are still in their infancy. Until clear guidelines are established, the accreditation process may not fit the online world as neatly as the traditional environment. Creating validity is an important task for online education providers. It is important for higher education professionals to maintain integrity in online accreditation. Educating the public about legitimate accreditation procedures may be the first step. It should be a top priority for colleges and universities. After all, an informed public can aid in the policing of diploma mills by boycotting non-reputable institutions.

Lack of acceptance in online education can also be due to more elusive factors

such as prestige. One of the biggest challenges in overcoming the negative perception may be dispelling social hierarchies. People have been attending traditional universities for hundreds of years, but online education is new. This may be why more confidence is placed on the traditional forms of educational delivery.

I think [the negative perception of online education] stems from just unknown. If you want to quote that as cultural, probably so; it's not a new phenomenon by any means.—that you are trying to get somebody to accept something that is different... (Interview 4)

I don't know that [just getting the word out about online education] would clearly overcome the negative perception. There is something to be said for college life and so many people that have lived it. (Interview 3)

Name recognition also plays an important part in social perceptions of online education.

I notice that there are all kinds of universities out there. Some of them don't have much name recognition. I think name recognition and creditability in education, it kind of goes hand-in-hand. (Interview 2)

Name recognition can be positive, or it can be negative. One participant even questioned accuracy of her perceptions between two local universities and one for-profit university.

If I think that someone has an OU degree or a TU degree versus a University of Phoenix, I'm probably going to favor the traditional--probably. And that may not be fair. (Interview 6)

Another participant commented on the recognition universities get from the "Best Colleges" list that is published each year (Interview 3). He said, "...society is so focused on the list (Interview 3). His hope was that if a prestigious university created a successful

online degree program, it would help lift the entire image of online education.

Prestige will always be an issue in higher education. The importance can be tied to literature on the power of social ranking. Society places a great deal of emphasis on occupation and its ability to elevate one's social status (Lenski, 1966; Mills & Hans, 1953; Weber, 1947). According to Packard (1961), education determines one's level of status throughout life. With so much weight placed on one factor, it is imperative for higher education professionals to recognize the social influences that might be a barrier in achieving equality between online and traditional education. Once identified, strategies for marketing to appropriate audiences can be achieved.

Public advertising is not capturing attention. Although personal experience and social influence had an effect on the participants' perceptions, public advertising did not seem to be a significant factor. Past research on Mere Exposure Theory showed positive results in creating favorable attitudes toward new products through the use of advertising (Baker, 1999). However, participants of this study seemed unaware of the advertisement of online education. One participant stated that she did not think online education in the [local] area is marketed enough, particularly those at more traditional colleges and universities (Interview 6).

For the most part, I feel like, especially in the [local] market, it's not as well known—the online training that's available... I don't think that's publicized very well. (Interview 6)

Five other participants said they were unfamiliar with online educational opportunities with local [local] colleges and universities.

To be honest with you, I don't know if a lot of the online education for OU or

anywhere like that has really come to my attention... (Interview 4)

In terms of what is offered in [the local area], I don't even know. (Interview 3)

I'm not familiar with what's exactly available through online as far as a full-degree program. (Interview 5)

There's no premier leader in online education in the markets that we operate in, which is primarily [local and regional]. (Interview 1)

That's a good question. I don't know... (Company name)—I don't know if [our company's human resources department] as committed to [online education] from a local, city perspective. (Interview 6)

On the surface, it would seem that exposure through advertising had little effect on the participants. If analyzed more closely, however, the lack of knowledge about online programs in the local area may have less to do with the type of advertising and more to do with the attention of the participant.

As one participant stated, he is not in the market for online education, so he does not pay particularly close attention to advertisements. He said he had really not given online education in the area much thought until approached for an interview for this study. "...but I haven't been out there seeking [online education] either," he went on to say (Interview 4).

None of the interviewees said their companies specifically seek knowledge about local online educational opportunities. However, the companies do actively provide opportunities for their employees who want to find educational programs that fit their individual learning goals. All of the participating companies offer college fairs for employees. The interviewees spoke highly of the visits to their companies from

university and college representatives.

Once or twice a year we will have a campus fair where the universities come.

That is a significant driver in terms of how students reach out to the various universities and frankly, how they reach out to us. Therein, probably becomes one of the main avenues for the university to talk about online or specific adult education... (Interview 1)

All local colleges and universities are free to attend the fairs.

During the interview process, the participants were most animate when discussing the topic of continuing education. They used positive postures, with open body language when describing their commitment to helping employees reach their educational goals. None of the companies distinguish between online and traditional programs or for-profit and non-profit institutions. They allow employees to choose the type of program that works best for them. Equal opportunity for institutions as well as employee was cultivated.

From the reaction of the participants, college fairs seem to be a perfect opportunity for higher education institutions to sell the convenience of online education to working adults. This is especially true of traditional college and universities that offer online programs. Again, social prestige is important. Potential students who may be resistant toward for-profit, online programs may welcome an online program from a traditionally based institution. Understanding the personal, corporate, and social attitudes toward online education will help higher education professionals define more clearly the selling points of online versus traditional educational programs.

Implications

This study is beneficial to higher education professionals from a research, theoretical, and practice perspective. It provides information about online education from a perspective that has not been studied often in the past--employers. It offers suggestions for better implementation of online programs and highlights Mere Exposure Theory as a legitimate lens for the study of perceptions of online education.

Research

Much information has been published about the attitudes of faculty, student, and higher education administrators toward online education, but not much has been published about employers' perceptions. With such importance being placed on the level of one's education in the marketplace (Weber, 1947; Gerth, Hans, & Mills, C. Wright, 1953), it is important to assess the employability of an individual with online coursework or an online degree. This study contributes to the research in this area.

Higher education administrators must start to define what it means to have online credentials and what these credentials mean in the employment market. Corporate administrators are just now starting to think about this issue themselves. Potential issues related to online credentials will likely increase as time passes. Knowing how the marketplace views online education now is important in building a positive future for online education.

This study indicates that corporate representatives are interested in knowing more about online education. From the study, it is evident that some believe online education lacks interaction, which precludes the teaching of some skills that are important in the workplace such as verbal communication and teambuilding. It is also evident that positive skills that translate well within the work environment can be obtained from the virtual environment. It

is important for colleges and universities to keep both the positive and negative aspects of the virtual world in mind when creating and marketing online programs. Virtual designers should strive to enhance the naturally positive aspects of online education while working to diminish the negative aspects. This will help to create legitimacy in the online environment.

Higher education professionals have an opportunity to produce a positive perception by actively doing research in the area of employer perceptions. Not only is it important to know what employers' perceptions are, it is important to know the factors that have led to the formation of these perceptions. It is critical to find out whether perceptions are built on personal experiences, social hierarchies, or legitimate discrepancies. Without learning the underlining influences, it is impossible to alter negative perceptions.

Practice

The practice of providing online education is complex and involves a variety of entities within the institution. It requires a unifying collaboration between administrators, faculty, and staff. It also involves the respect from an assortment of entities outside the institution. Online education is not valuable if it does not meet the needs of the outside community. Assessing the perceptions of outside stakeholders and evaluating the findings against online delivery procedures within colleges and universities will help higher education professionals create more a desirable product.

This study is beneficial to institutions of higher education in that it shows the existence of positive attitudes toward online education within a specific marketplace. It also indicates exposure to online education as a major contributor to its acceptance. The study has the potential to help higher education professional develop new ways of exposing employers to online education.

As brought out through the themes of this study, one way of doing this is to work directly with corporations to provide continuing education and corporate training opportunities for their employees. College fairs were mentioned as a main avenue for the promotion of online educational programs within the corporations. College fairs allow companies to express specific needs to universities. They offer universities an avenue for the developing personal relationships with companies. One benefit of college fairs for higher education professionals is the ability to attract a steady student population from the existing workforce. Another benefit is to get an inside look at company environments, which might lead to the ability of higher education professionals to anticipation of future corporate needs.

Creating a virtual environment that incorporates more interactivity was strongly desired by the participants of this study. Suggestions were made that are beneficial to designers in developing a more attractive virtual environment. Perhaps, the most important point made by participants dealt with the concept of student learning styles. As in the traditional classroom, participants said, not everyone learns in the same manner. Some prefer auditory learning techniques. Some prefer visual materials. The ability of online education designers and professors to compensate for these varied styles is the key to successful teaching in any environment. It has specific importance to online designers and professors who are seeking to achieve legitimacy in an increasingly crowded market.

As stated in the discussion, never before has distance education had the opportunity to combine such a variety of learning media. It is up to faculty and administrators to conduct studies that have the power to reveal clues that aid designers of online programs to construct products that suite the needs of the community. Studies on employers' perceptions of online education can help identify the missing links in the current system and provide a vision of the

future.

Theory

One way higher education professionals can evaluate the usefulness and acceptance of online education is by using a variety of theories to examine it. This study is useful in that it assesses the benefit of Mere Exposure Theory in evaluating the effect exposure has on the perceptions of online education.

Within this study, Mere Exposure was an appropriate lens to use for evaluating the perceptions of online education in the marketplace. The results seem to indicate that exposure is a key factor in the acceptance of online education for participants. Three of the participants directly stated that, due to exposure, their attitudes toward online education had become more positive. Two acknowledged positive experiences related to a family member's exposure. All participants spoke highly of corporate training through the use of online education.

This research study approached Mere Exposure from a broad spectrum. The intent was to define the appropriateness of using Mere Exposure Theory when assessing the perceptions of participants. The use of the theory may be more beneficial when channeled directly toward specific types of exposure. Research could be directed toward specific types of advertising or personal experience, for example. A comparison study could be conducted to explain the impact of the various types of exposure on the formation of perceptions.

Online education is a growing phenomenon. Defining the difference among the various online educational opportunities is important. Corporations not only see a difference between online and traditional education, they see a difference between individual online institutions. Promoting programs within specific markets will help to define these areas more

clearly. It will also help to identify where the credentials obtained for the various educational institutions fit into the marketplace.

People in the business world are extremely busy. They expressed concern about online education and the confusing array of institutions that are popping up in the online world. They do not have time to investigate every class on the transcript of every student. Perhaps the answer is to create a designation for online education, but likely, the better answer is to create reputable online environments that business professionals think meet the needs of their employee base and do not cause the company to question their credibility. As Berg (2002) states, low concern for interactivity produces failure; new technologies require new pedagogical approaches.

This study is itself an example of its theoretical perspective of constructionism. The underlying premise of constructionism is that every encounter with the world changes one's reality. Therefore, the reality of the interviewees has been altered due to their participation in the study. A look at their new realities would reveal these changes and, possibly, also create additional changes in their realities. Additional interaction may also help to pinpoint the avenue through which their realities were transformed.

Conclusions

Participants in the study did not think online coursework is equivalent to traditionally acquired coursework. They believed it lacks interactivity and does not foster a sense of community. It does not provide some valuable skills such as teambuilding and networking. However, they also believed it is an important educational tool and should be used. It provides convenience, flexibility, and cost savings for both students and companies. It offers corporations a way to maintain a full-time workforce while

increasing their corporate knowledge base by helping employees develop new skills. It also teaches student responsibility, self pacing, and technology skills not learned in the traditional classroom.

Participants clearly believed that not all educational opportunities or institutions are equal. They believed online learning provides a set of learned skills unique to its environment. Classroom learning provides a different set of learned skills. Traditional education provides an opportunity to develop face-to-face communication skills and a team approach to accomplishing tasks, they stated. Online education builds self-motivation and technology skills. It also teaches students to adapt to a variety of learning environments. Taking this into consideration, participants of this study preferred a hybrid approach (defined as a combination of online and face to face) to education. Participants believed that even for-profit institutions like University of Phoenix have a place in education, as long as people understand that the mission is different from the non-profit educational mission.

Personal experience leads the way in the formation of positive perceptions about online education. Three participants stated that if asked a few years ago, their perception of online education would have been different from their perception today. The reason for this change is personal experience. However, not all is positive. Four participants believed, to some extent, that online education is inferior to traditional education. Their perceptions were affected by tradition, social pressure, and makeup of the teaching base.

The type of class is not the only factor in predicting a quality education. Student responsibility plays a significant part. The material presented in class is only a portion of the learning experience. Manipulation of the material is another. Learning is an

individual experience, and some students are well suited to the online environment. The student's ability to apply what he or she has learned is important. This is especially true when viewed from a company's perspective. If a student is not able to translate theory into practice, he or she will not be able to function in the corporate world.

Online education is just beginning to affect the hiring process. Companies are only now starting to wonder what it means to have online credentials. They are beginning to realize an increase in the number of online institutions will create a need to investigate the appropriateness of their applicants' credentials. It will also change the interview process. Applicants may begin to see an increase in the number of interview questions related to their learning experience. Currently, it is not clear if policies regarding online education will become formal, but it is clear that online education is making its way into the mainstream. If asked five years ago, four participants said they would have had a negative perception. If asked again in five years, what will their answers be?

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Future Research

Although qualitative protocols such as the one used in this study do not require large numbers of participants nor seek to generalize results, the small number of participants involved in the study may have limited its perceived transferability. If desired, future researchers may be able to design solicitation strategies to create a larger pool of participants. One suggestion might be to change the protocol for initial contact. Initial contact might be expanded to include other departments such as Public Relations, Educational Development, or Community Outreach in the initial contact stage. The geographical scope of the study could also be expanded to a state or regional area.

Company prerequisites for selection into the final company pool included: for-profit,

non-medical, non-manufacturing, non-retail, and service-oriented companies. The prospective company pool was chosen because each company had a high likelihood of employing people who have business degrees. Because business degrees are prevalent in online education, it was thought that the interviewees would have a higher likelihood of exposure to online education than fields such as engineering, architecture, or other more specific degrees. This assumption was based on researcher opinion. Formal research would need to be conducted to confirm the assumption.

The study used strictly volunteer participants. Those who are interested in the subject matter are more likely to participate in the study. This may lead to an overly positive or negative picture of the perceptions of online education. To lessen this limitation, the researcher could have inquired, beyond those reasons that were spontaneously provided, as to the participant's motivation for getting involved.

The only formal selection requirement for study rested on the participant's ability to hire and dismiss employees. There was no consideration given to past experience with technology or online education. Age, race, and gender of participants were not screened. Accounting for these variables may produce different results.

As with any qualitative study, the reader should be warned against generalizing the results. The results are not intended to predict behavior. They are simply a reflection of the perceptions presented within a specific population within a specific period of time.

Additional Recommendations for Future Research

Although there is strong evidence that distance education is changing the landscape of higher education, there is little literature measuring the perception of online coursework and degrees in the marketplace. Due to increasing globalization, businesses are demanding

more specific outcomes from higher education (Newman, 2005). More studies on the perception of online education within specific occupations are needed.

Newman (2005) writes that businesses are concerned with the level of skill obtained by the workforce. He says that because businesses are under increased pressure to compete in a global market, the need for skilled employees has increased. The type of skills achieved depends upon the type of instruction students receive on college and university campuses. The importance of evaluating the impact of online education on the marketplace has never been more critical.

Almost unlimited avenues exist for continued research in the area of perceptions of online education in the marketplace. One recommendation for future research is to define acceptable concentrations of online education in various fields within the marketplace. One suggestion is to do a mixed method study that includes surveys and follow-up interviews. It is beneficial to the research about online education to find out on a large scale what perceptions have been formed by employers within the job market, then investigate more deeply how these perceptions were formed by interviewing several of the initial survey participants.

Because the participants of this study seem to have had an outdated definition of traditional education, a study that provides current definitions of traditional and online education before interviewing begins may yield superior results. As stated in the study, today's "traditional" educational approach already mirrors what the participants conceive as a hybrid approach. A study of this type would change the constructed reality of the participants before the start of the interviews. This would produce a completely different approach to the study of perceptions.

A longitudinal study tracking the perceptions of hiring managers has the potential of

producing valuable results. The study might reflect changing attitudes over time or highlight exposure's influence on perceptions.

One might also investigate the perception of online education with specific career arenas such as nursing or banking. Online education may be more suitable for certain fields than for others. It may depend on the saturation of the market. Those markets that are more saturated may have more stringent credential requirements.

A fourth recommendation is to study the perception of online education within specific countries, regions, or states. Rural areas may be more accepting of online education due the lack of opportunities provided otherwise, or they may not be as accepting because online education is not a familiar form of educational delivery.

A study of specific skill sets is also a possibility, the aim being the development of higher education programs that target skill sets more easily taught in the online environment and the identification of skills that more appropriately fit into a traditional or hybrid model.

An informative study could develop from interviewing recent graduates of online programs offered by traditional universities and for-profit universities to learn if the interview process developed questions about online education. Did hiring managers recognize the online degree and ask specific questions about it? Was it an issue during the interview process?

Employers have a perspective that is unique to specific areas. Seeking their input provides a means of aiding in the development of competitive and effective programs for the future of students, the academe, and businesses.

Commentary

While working on this dissertation, I served on the search committee for a new library

director at the university where I work. As I was going through the posted vitas, I noticed that one applicant lived in one location but had a degree from another location during the same time period. It seemed odd to me, so I did some investigating. The answer became clear when I discovered that the university offered online Ph.D. programs. The applicant lived in one location while he worked toward a virtual degree in another state.

As I continued to look through vitas, I began to become more aware of the names of the universities listed under education. I investigated all universities that were unfamiliar to me. After investigating several institutions, I discovered that another applicant had a degree from an online program.

I found myself in the place that many of the participants of my study described. I found myself doing a lot of homework. I looked closely at the accreditation the online programs listed on their websites. I also looked at the degree requirements and class descriptions for the programs. I found myself being increasingly critical. It seemed to me that the programs offered too many dissertation hours compared to a traditional degree program. In fact, the online doctorate programs allowed twice the number of dissertation hours as the traditional programs with which I am familiar.

I would like to say that I investigated the traditional programs I encountered on the vitas as closely as I did the virtual programs, but I did not. By virtue of name recognition, I felt much more at ease with many of the traditional programs. I did not feel compelled to do a complete search of coursework associated with the programs.

Today, I have not ruled out the two applicants, but I may be leaning in that direction. I do not think that online education as a whole is unequal to traditional education. I am only hesitant because the requirements for the particular programs do not seem to be as rigorous as

a traditional degree. To make my decision completely fair, I intend to go back to each vita and investigate more closely the degree requirements for all of the applicants regardless of whether the individual received his/her degree from a traditional or online institution.

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Appendix A

Interview Request Script

Hello. My name is Kathy Seibold. I am a doctoral candidate at Oklahoma State University. I would like the opportunity to interview you or someone else you might recommend for my dissertation entitled, *Employers' Perceptions of Online Education* (initial HR contact will read: "interview administrative professionals"). My dissertation will explore the perception of online education from the viewpoint of employers. My intention is to help institutions of higher education assess the level of acceptance online education has achieved, define online credentials more clearly, and design and market better online education programs.

I am looking for 6 to 10 prospective companies that employ more than 500 employees and are located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I will interview 1 supervisor/department head within each company, creating a total of 6 to 10 interviews. Each interview will last for approximately one hour. They will be scheduled at times and locations that are convenient for you (initial HR contact: "convenient for the interviewee"). Measures to protect confidential will be taken during and after the interview process.

By partaking in this study, participants will increase their knowledge of online education. They will gain a better understanding of quality training in higher education. And, they will develop a thought process for hiring employees that includes consideration of existing and future developments in training.

Interviews will be recorded for convenience and accuracy in transcribing. To

maintain confidentiality, I will not use identifying information in the transcript or the final paper. I will use initials and pseudonyms only. I will share the transcript and final paper with the interviewee and with my dissertation committee. Because of the importance of this topic, I also hope to publish an article in the future.

I appreciate your consideration of my request. If you would like to take some time to contemplate, I can be reached by telephone at 660-3102 (w) or 639-4863 (c) or by email at kathy.seibold@okstate.edu or kseibold@ou.edu. Please also feel free to contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Kerri Kearney, Oklahoma, Department of Educational Leadership, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-2755, kerri.kearney@okstate.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Appendix B

Interview Request Letter

Kathy Seibold
OSU Doctoral Candidate
3119 Woodward Boulevard
Tulsa, OK 74105
(918) 660-3102 or 639-4863

Date

Interviewee Name
Company
Address
Telephone Number

Dear ,

My name is Kathy Seibold. I am a doctoral candidate at Oklahoma State University. I would like the opportunity to interview you or someone else you might recommend for my dissertation entitled, *Employers' Perceptions of Online Education* (initial HR contact will read: "interview administrative professionals"). My dissertation will explore the perception of online education credentials from the viewpoint of employers. My intention is to help institutions of higher education assess the level of acceptance online education has achieved, define online credentials more clearly, and design and market better online education programs.

I am looking for 6 to 10 prospective companies that employ more than 500 employees and are located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I will interview 1 supervisor/department head within each company, creating a total of 6 to 10 interviews. Each interview will last for approximately one hour. They will be scheduled at times and locations that are convenient for you (initial HR contact: "convenient for the interviewee"). Measures to protect confidential will be taken during and after the interview process.

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Interviews will be recorded for convenience and accuracy in transcribing. To maintain confidentiality, I will not use identifying information in the transcript or the final paper. I will use initials and pseudonyms only. I will share the transcript and final paper with the interviewee and with my dissertation committee. Because of the importance of this topic, I also hope to publish an article in the future.

I appreciate your consideration of my request. If you would like to take some time to contemplate, I can be reached by telephone at 660-3102 (w) or 639-4863 (c) or by email at kathy.seibold@okstate.edu or kseibold@ou.edu. Please also feel free to contact my dissertation advisor, Dr. Kerri Kearney, Oklahoma, Department of Educational Leadership, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-2755, kerri.kearney@okstate.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Kathy Seibold

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Thanks for agreeing to be a part of my research. I appreciate your time and interest in my dissertation. To get started, I want to tell you a little more about what my plans are for the study.

Now that you know a little more about me and what I am doing, I would like to know more about you and your perspectives.

1. Describe your supervisory role within the company—i.e., length of employment, how many people supervised, etc.
2. In what ways have you been exposed or educated about the availability of online education coursework or degree programs in the area/United States? The quality?
3. How do you define online education?
4. How do you view the future role of online education in the Tulsa area?
5. What are your perceptions about the quality of online coursework and/or degrees in comparison to more traditional education?”
6. What differences do you perceive between non-profit institutions such as Oklahoma State University that offer online coursework and for-profit institutions such as the University of Phoenix that offer online coursework?
7. Do you know which higher education institutions in town offer online coursework? If so, how do you stay abreast of such information?
8. What types of marketing approaches have had the most influence on your perception of online education?
9. In what other ways have your perceptions of online credentials been impacted (experience through employees, personal experience, etc.)?
10. What aspects of online education are appealing or unappealing to you as an employer?

11. During interviews, do you ask whether a potential employee has completed coursework online? If so, how do you approach the subject?
12. How does the fact that a potential employee has online coursework influence your decision to hire him or her?

That is the last question I have. Do you have anything you would like to add?

Great! Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it. I will send you a copy of the transcript as soon as I finish transcribing it, so you can verify its accuracy. I ask that you submit any clarifications or elaborations to me, so the study depicts your perceptions accurately.

Appendix D

Consent to Participate In a Research Study Oklahoma State University

Project Title: Employers' Perceptions of Online Education

Investigators: Kathy Seibold, Ed.D. Candidate

Purpose:

You are invited to participate in a research study on employers' perceptions of online education. I am asking you to participate because you are an administrator within a Tulsa company that employs at least 500 people and you have the authority to hire employees.

The purpose of the study is to explore Tulsa-based employers' perceptions of online education and to identify the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions.

Procedures:

If you decide to participate in this project, I will conduct an interview with you. The interview will be audio taped and transcribed by me. You will be asked 10 to 15 open-ended questions related to your position with the company, your exposure to online education, and your perception of online education.

After the interview has been transcribed, I will send a copy of the transcript to you via email or U.S. mail, depending upon your preference. You will be asked to conduct a member-check by reading the transcript and making suggestions for clarification or correction. Your comments will serve as a credibility measure.

There will be 6 to 10 other Tulsa-based administrative professionals participating in this study over a four-month period. The study will allow me to meet the dissertation requirement for a Doctorate of Education in Higher Education at Oklahoma State University. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. There will be no cost to you for participation.

Risks of Participation:

The only possible risk might be accidental disclosure of information. However, as noted under confidentiality, this risk has been greatly reduced by keeping all records anonymous.

Benefits of Participation:

A general benefit from this study is a better understanding of the perception of online education within the marketplace. It is hoped that the study will contribute to the larger body of knowledge related to best practices in online education.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research.

I have been trained in confidentiality through the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board. Your identity will remain unknown because the names of participants will not be used in any presentations of this study. I will assign all interviewees a number. All interview transcripts will be labeled with the assigned number. No names will appear on the interview transcripts. A list of interviewees and assigned transcript numbers will be housed separately from the transcripts of interviews. The list will only be available to me and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The only copy of the transcripts I will share with my dissertation advisor and committee will be the numbered copy. No official titles or specific job functions will be used in the writ up for this research either. Job function descriptions will be limited to generic supervisory duties.

Following analysis of the results and confirmation that all needed data has been collected, the document matching the transcript numbers with your name will be destroyed by shredding of the document. Audio tapes of your interview will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed, you have completed a member-check, and my dissertation advisor has completed a peer debrief.

Consent forms will be stored separately from interview transcripts and other research records. They will be placed in a locked filing cabinet.

Compensation:

No compensation will be offered for your participation.

Contacts:

If you have any questions about this research project, you may contact Kathy Seibold, Ed.D. Candidate, Department of Educational Leadership, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (918) 746-5574, kathy.seibold@okstate.edu, or Dr. Kerri Kearney, Dissertation Advisor, Department of Educational Leadership, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-2755, kerri.kearney@okstate.edu. You may also contact the IRB Office at 219 Cordell North, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, (405) 744-1676, irb@okstate.edu with any questions concerning participant's rights.

Participant's Rights:

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may refuse to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time without penalty.

Consent Documentation:

I have read and understood the consent form. I understand that my signature means that I am agreeing to my participation as well as the participation. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy has been given to me.

I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

Signature of Researcher

Date

Appendix E

2006
Largest Employers List

The data is broken down into four sections:

- 1,000 or more employees
- 500 – 999 employees
- 250 – 499 employees
- 100 – 249 employees

Each listing contains:

- Company name
- Address
- City State Zip
- Phone Fax
- Product or Service

The 2006 Largest Employers List is a publication of:

Economic Development

*The 2006 Largest Employers List is compiled from many sources and every attempt has been made to insure the accuracy of the data.
Please forward any corrections or additions to the address above.*

1,000 or More Employees

AAON	AMERICAN AIRLINES	BANK OF OKLAHOMA
BLUE CROSS & BLUE SHIELD	BROKEN ARROW PUBLIC SCHOOLS	CENDANT RENT A CAR
CENTRILIFT	CINGULAR WIRELESS	DECISIONONE
DIRECTV	DOLLAR THRIFTY AUTOMOTIVE	ECHOSTAR
EDS	HILLCREST HEALTHCARE SYSTEM	IBM
JENKS PUBLIC SCHOOLS	MCI	PUBLIC SERVICE CO OF OKLA
REASOR'S FOODS	SAINT FRANCIS HEALTH SYSTEM	SOUTHWESTERN BELL
SPIRIT AEROSYSTEMS INC.	ST JOHN MEDICAL CENTER	STATE FARM INSURANCE

THE NORDAM GROUP

**TULSA COMMUNITY
COLLEGE**

TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS

UNION PUBLIC SCHOOLS

UNIVERSITY OF TULSA

US POSTAL SERVICE

WAL-MART

WHIRLPOOL

**WILLIAMS COMPANIES
INC**

**WILTEL
COMMUNICATIONS**

500 – 999 Employees

ALBERTSON'S

BAMA COS

BARTLETT COLLINS CO

CHEROKEE CASINO

DEPT OF HUMAN SERVICES

DILLARD'S

FORD GLASS

HILTI

HOME DEPOT

IC OF OKLAHOMA

JC PENNEY

JOHN ZINK CO

METLIFE INSURANCE

METRIS CO

**NATIONAL STEAK &
POULTRY**

ONEOK INC

ORAL ROBERTS UNIVERSITY

**OSU COLL OF
OSTEOPATHIC MED**

OWASSO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

QUIKTRIP CORP

SAMSON INVESTMENT CO

SOUTHCREST HOSPITAL

SPRINGER CLINIC

SUNOCO INC

TULSA TECHNOLOGY CTR

UNITED STATES CELLULAR

**UNIV. OF OKLAHOMA -
TULSA**

US ARMY CORPS OF ENG

VANGUARD CAR RENTAL

VICTORY CHRISTIAN CTR

WEST TELESERVICES

WORLD PUBLISHING CO

Appendix F

Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Friday, February 02, 2007
IRB Application No ED06221
Proposal Title: Employer's Perceptions of Online Education

Reviewed and Expedited
Processed as:

Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 2/1/2008

Principal Investigator(s)

Kathy N. Seibold
3119 Woodward Blvd.
Tulsa, OK 74105

Kerri Shutz Kearney
315 Willard
Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sue C. Jacobs, Chair
Institutional Review Board

VITA

Kathy Norene Seibold

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctorate of Education

Dissertation: EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Major Field: Higher Education

Education:

- | | |
|-----------|--|
| 2004-2007 | Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma
Completed the requirements for the Doctorate of Education with a major in Higher Education in July 2007 |
| 1999-2001 | The University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma
Master of Library and Information Studies |
| 1996-1998 | Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, Oklahoma
Counseling, Hours Completed: 21 |
| 1990-1992 | Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri
Bachelor of Science in Education, Elementary / Computer |

Experience:

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| Present | University of Oklahoma – Tulsa, Oklahoma
Director of Student Affairs
Assistant Adjunct Professor, College of Liberal Studies |
| 2004-2005 | Oral Roberts University, Tulsa Oklahoma
Coordinator Distance Education, LifeLong Education |
| 2002-2004 | Tulsa Historical Society, Tulsa, Oklahoma
Curator / Archivist |
| Spring 1996 | Northwest Technical Institute, Springdale, Arkansas
Computer Instructor |
| 1992-1999 | Jay Public Schools, Jay, Oklahoma
Counselor, Computer Teacher / Supervisor of Programs |

Professional Memberships: Association for the Study of Higher Education, National Association of Colleges and Employers, Oklahoma Association of Colleges and Employers

Name: Kathy Seibold

Date of Degree: July, 2007

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Study Title: EMPLOYERS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Pages in Study: 130 Pages

Candidate for the degree of Doctorate of Education

Major Field: Higher Education

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to explore employers' perceptions of online education and to identify the factors influencing the formation of these perceptions. The study employed a qualitative research approach. Purposeful random sampling was used to select 15 service-oriented companies in the Midwest that employed more than 500 employees. Of the 14 companies still in business at the time of the study, 6 companies agreed to interviews—43%. One supervisor or department head from each company was selected for interview, creating a total of 6 interviews. Field notes were taken at each interview location. The researcher collected artifacts detailing hiring practices via each company's human resources website. Content analysis was used to analyze the information collected and establish common themes. The extraction of themes from the interview transcripts included coding through the use of pawing and pile-sorting. Mere Exposure Theory was used as a lens when analyzing the themes that emerge from the information about exposure to online education.

Findings and Contributions: Analysis of the interviews, field notes, and artifacts produced 10 common themes:

Online education is convenient, but it lacks interactivity.

Online education increases student responsibility.

Participants prefer a hybrid or mixed media approach to education.

The future of online education is positive.

For-profit and non-profit educational institutions have different missions.

Online education impacts the hiring processes

Diploma classifications for Online Education are not needed.

Personal experience positively impacts perceptions.

Society has a negative impact on perceptions.

Public advertising is not capturing attention.

These themes established a connection to the research questions for the study. Mere Exposure was an appropriate lens to use for evaluating the perceptions of online education in the marketplace. The results seem to indicate that exposure is a key factor in the acceptance of online education for participants.

Adviser's Approval: Dr. Kerri Kearney