The Importance of Peer Engagement and Peer Support Groups on Persistence of Online Law Students: A Mixed Methods Study

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The Importance of Peer Engagement and Peer Support Groups on Persistence of Online Law Students: A Mixed Methods Study

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

College of Education and Social Work

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

By

Larasz A. Moody

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my late brother, Darwin, who was always in my heart and thoughts throughout this process. To my supportive husband, George, who gave me space, made me laugh and kept me sane. Thank you. To my beautiful son, Sebastian, there are no words for how much you mean to me. Everything I do is for you. You are becoming such a great young man with the biggest heart and greatest wit. I know this past year has been really hard for you, but you have handled it with grace and courage. You are the reason I persist!
Acknowledgments

It is fitting that the focus of my study is on the factors that help students persist, because without the encouragement and support of the following people I am certain I would not have made it this far.

- To my advisor and chairperson, Dr. David Backer, your calm and focused demeanor was exactly what I needed throughout this process. I greatly appreciate your guidance, your feedback and encouragement.

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- To the students who I have the great fortune of helping on a daily basis persist to achieve their goals. Thank you for your willingness to take time out of your schedules to help with this study and to be a part of the solution to make online education better for all students.

- To the mighty Cohort 3, you all are a simply a great group of people. I had no idea what to expect when I entered this program, but within the first few months I knew I would be just fine with this group. You all are truly the most generous, funny and supportive group of colleagues. I look forward to seeing all the great things each of us will do in the future!

- Finally, to my friends and family, who held me up on my down days and cheered for me on my high days. I love you all!
Abstract

There is a lack of research on peer support and peer engagement in online graduate programs, particularly in online law schools where the research is practically non-existent. The purpose of this mixed methods study is to examine how important peer support is to first-year online law students. There is extensive research that posits the efficacy of peer support on online students in undergraduate programs (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1984) but not enough attention is given to how peer support impacts adult online students with significant external and internal compounding factors (Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Redmond, 2018). This mixed methods study will help to fill that void and also provide the student perspective, which is often missing in research on online graduate students. This study was segmented into two parts, a quantitative survey in the first phase and qualitative follow up interviews in the second phase. The results of the quantitative part of the study revealed that online law students regarded faculty and advisor support as more important factors to persistence than peer support. However, the data collected from students that participated in the peer groups and shared their experiences in the second half of the study suggest that peer engagement does have a positive impact on persistence. The data also proposes that other factors such as time limitations, family and work obligations may make it difficult for students to participate in peer groups. Furthermore, external factors coupled with independent learning characteristics and a heightened sense of self-efficacy may also contribute to a lack of participation in peer groups.

Keywords: peer support, persistence, peer engagement, faculty support, advisor support, online law student, online graduate student,
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Chapter 1

“Ambition is the path to success. Persistence is the vehicle you arrive in”

-Bill Bradley
(Former professional basketball player and U.S. Senator)

Background

As a Black female from a low income neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago, the odds of me achieving not just one but three advanced degrees are beyond my ancestors’ wildest dreams. Yet, here I am. Some may think that I achieved my academic success because all the cards were in my favor, and it was easy for me to get here on my own, but that is the farthest thing from the truth. The truth is that my academic achievements are the result of many people not giving up on me and encouraging me to succeed. For example, my parents paying my rent so I did not have to work while studying for the bar allowed me to persist. My husband encouraging me and taking care of our son so I could study and write during my doctoral courses. Also, my friends providing me with the encouragement I needed to persist. The support received from my family are friends was essential to my success with my academic goals, and I know that I would not be where I am today without those people and many others.

My story is not unique. There are thousands of students from marginalized backgrounds with significant academic achievements that could not have been foretold from their beginnings. For example, I know a woman who graduated from high school with a one-year-old baby on her hip. Through a lot of stops and starts not only she did she complete her bachelor’s degree, but she now has a doctorate degree and is a successful scholar. I know another woman who did not even attend high school and had three children before the age of 20 and is now finishing her last
year of college in her 50’s. Or another young man who was homeless and orphaned at a young age, started at community college, finished his bachelor’s degree at a traditional brick and mortar, later went to law school, and is now a successful attorney. These people are not exceptional in the literal sense of the word; rather they had the drive and the will to persist and accomplish their goals.

The quote that began this chapter captures my journey as a Black woman and those of countless others who have ambition, drive, and persistence that push us down our paths. I would argue, however, that no one travels their path alone. Persistence requires help. A person running a marathon has support along that 26.2 mile stretch where people are giving them cheers, handing them water or energy bars, and helping them to the finish line. The same applies to the adult learner who takes on the challenge of getting a degree online, they do not do it alone. This study will examine those factors that help students, particularly online graduate students, to persist in achieving their goals.

Purpose and Rationale of the Study

This study will examine the impact that peer support has on online law school students. Although the findings and conclusions learned from this study will be gained from studying online law school students, there are commonalities that will help to improve student affairs programming for all online graduate students. There is a great deal of quantitative research on attrition factors for online programs, but the amount of research is not as vast for online graduate programs, particularly online legal programs because of the scarcity of online legal programs in existence. This study will provide insights into online law students perspectives on what factors are important to persistence in an online law program.
There are an abundance of empirical studies of online undergraduate programs, but not as much for graduate programs (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ortagus, 2016; Watkins-Lewis, 2016; Kuo & Belland, 2016; Strayhorn, 2018). There is even more of a shortage of research on persistence in online legal programs as compared to undergraduate or other graduate programs (Dutton et al., 2019). The lack of research in online graduate programming is surprising given the rise in students pursuing graduate degrees online. According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2018), three million students were enrolled in postbaccalaureate degree programs, representing a 41 percent increase since 2000. Postbaccalaureate degree programs include master’s and doctoral programs, as well as professional doctoral programs such as law, medicine, and dentistry.

Of the three million graduate students, 60% are women and 37% identify with a minority racial/ethnic group (NCES, 2018). Furthermore, within that group of post graduate takers, 40% of students are taking some or all of their courses online (NCES, 2018). The student demographics of the program examined in this study reflects that of the national data. New Law School has over 60% female students and the majority of the students are over 30 years of age. The racial demographic of our student population is diverse as well, with 21% identifying as African American, 11% identifying as LatinX, 40% identifying as Caucasian, 5% identifying as Asian/Pacific Islander, and 20% preferring not to identify or disclose a racial/ethnic category.

In addition to existing research that finds an overwhelming majority of graduate online learners are older, female, and non-white, the research also supports that online graduate students are primarily working full time, have increased family and work obligations and, as a result, are more vulnerable to higher attrition rates than traditional higher education students (Ke & Xie, 2009; Ortagus, 2016; Yang et al., 2015). The pressure is even more intensified in graduate
programs where there are increased academic demands (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Although there is growing research on why online graduate students have higher rates of attrition than traditional graduate students, there is not enough on how to address the problem (Bawa, 2016). Thus, my study will serve to examine those factors that negatively and positively impact graduate student persistence and investigate a possible solution through increased peer support programs. Moreover, having an improved understanding of the factors related to online graduate student persistence will provide insights that will not only improve programming for students at New Law School but also serve to improve the online learning experience for all online graduate students.

**Statement of the Problem**

Lyndon B. Johnson (1964) said, “education is not a problem; education is an opportunity.” Those remarks were a part of Johnson’s “Great Society” speech given at the University of Michigan. At that time, Johnson remarked that eight million adult Americans had not finished five years of school; nearly 20 million had not finished eight years of school; and nearly 54 million--more than one-quarter of all America at the time--had not even finished high school. That speech was given in May of 1964, the same year that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, which widened the doors of educational access for minorities. Researchers and advocates claim that online graduate programs advance the intent of the Civil Rights Act and level the playing field for all American citizens by providing educational opportunities that were once unattainable (Goodman et al., 2019).

Online programming was not available in its current form in 1964 (although the University of Chicago created the first correspondence school in 1873). However, since the start of the first fully online program in 1989 by the University of Phoenix, the pathway to higher
education has significantly broadened to include people from all strata of society (Ortagus, 2016; Kuo & Belland, 2016). In fact, between 2012-2016, enrollment in distance education has increased every year, with more pronounced growth in online graduate programs (Seaman et al., 2018). This growth is perhaps due to the advantages that online learning offers, such as convenience, flexibility, and financial benefits (Seaman et al., 2018). There have been tremendous gains within higher education since 1964, particularly concerning online programs; that growth has also extended to online law programs.

Although slower than other graduate programs, law schools have evolved to include online programming as a part of their curriculum (Huffman, 2015). Just as the growth of online learning in other disciplines has the broad goal of increasing accessibility and lowering cost for students, those goals are also reflected in online law schools' mission. Law schools are broadening the scope of their reach to expand legal opportunities to students who want to be lawyers and increase access to justice for those who otherwise may not be able to access a lawyer (Huffman, 2015). The goal of increasing access by growing online law programs is admirable, and it is also viewed as disruptive because it is upsetting the centuries-old way of teaching law and, perhaps, increasing access to a legal education beyond the limits of what the market can bear (Van Detta, 2015).

Nevertheless, market demand and widespread change to the delivery of education have forced the American Bar Association (ABA) to amend its policies to allow for increased online programming in law schools. Before 1997, there were no law schools offering programs in a distance education platform. In 1997, the ABA allowed its first variance to its rules and allowed law schools to include online courses in their J.D. programs (Dutton et al., 2019). However, the legal academy, holding to its role as consumer gatekeepers, swiftly dissented in 1999 by
questioning the number of courses offered and how they could be offered. The ABA responded by implementing the policy that law schools could only offer distance education after the first year of law school and only allow up to 15 credits to be taken online (Dutton et al., 2019). However, in 2020 at the start of the worldwide Coronavirus pandemic, which forced virtually every law school online, the ABA had to make an unprecedented pivot and granted a widespread temporary variance to allow law schools to offer fully online programming (Dutton & Mohapatra, 2021). Thus, law schools, which previously almost universally rejected online teaching, joined the ranks of hundreds of other online programs and had to quickly switch gears to reach and teach its adult online students.

The beginning of the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic forced most law schools to offer “emergency remote learning”, which should be distinguished from pedagogically and technologically sound online learning (Dutton & Mohapatra, 2021). The initial panic that many faculty and administrators in law schools faced was rooted in the fear that they would not be able to deliver the traditional Socratic method of law school teaching, or that practical/clinical education would suffer or students would not be able to receive academic or student support (Thornton et al., 2020). For many law schools those fears still persist, but one year after the start of the pandemic many law schools are opting to move their entire law school curriculum online and have taken the steps needed to offer engaging and academically rigorous online law school courses (Thornton et al., 2020; Dutton & Mohapatra, 2021).

A significant issue that traditional law schools may not have contemplated in moving to a fully online format is attrition and persistence. Although previous research has addressed attrition in legal education, it is usually framed with respect to brick and mortar programs and primarily focuses on minority attrition (Robbins, 2020). With the increase in online legal
programs due to the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic and the potential increases in enrollment, attrition for all students should be a central focus for all legal programs. The move to a fully online platform will likely present most, if not all, law schools with the same attrition challenges faced by other graduate programs.

Online students' attrition rates are almost six to seven times higher in online programs than in traditional brick and mortar programs (Boston et al., 2011; Hart, 2012; Gaytan, 2015). It is estimated that 50 percent of all online graduate students leave their graduate program before completing their degree (Strayhorn, 2018). The New Law School program has an average attrition rate of 80 percent after the first year of study. High rates of attrition is a significant financial concern for universities, but it also has substantial monetary and emotional costs for the individual student, such as loss of confidence in one's ability to succeed (Strayhorn, 2018). While this paper will address the factors impacting attrition and persistence in an online law program, the factors impacting attrition presented in this study are applicable to other graduate programs as well. This paper will address the following questions.

**Research Questions:**

1) How does peer support impact student persistence and engagement in an online law program?

2) Which of these external factors, if any, influence peer engagement in online law program: career demands, family demands, and institutional support?

3) Which of these intrinsic factors, if any, influence peer engagement in an online law program: self-motivation and skills competency?

4) How have the experiences of peer support impacted student persistence in an online law program?
Rationale for Methods

My study will examine the persistence of online graduate students quantitatively and qualitatively, connecting emergent themes from the qualitative study to the quantitative variables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Specifically, the study will employ an explanatory sequential mixed methods design. This study is similar to a mixed-methods case study design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), which integrates quantitative and qualitative data results to support a case or an activity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This study is not presenting a particular case for analysis, but it is presenting the activity of peer support groups as a needed resource for student persistence. Thus, the integration of quantitative and qualitative data in a case study design will support such an assertion.

This design will allow for a closer examination of the factors related to graduate online students' persistence. I used data from a survey developed specifically for online graduate students, which includes questions related to persistence variables. In addition to the quantitative survey, the participants' perspectives will provide context to the quantitative data and give a more nuanced understanding of persistence. The explanatory sequential design intends to connect the qualitative data with the quantitative results, and I will use both to explain the phenomenon of persistence and motivation in online graduate students.

The survey used in this study was developed by Natalya Ivankova (2004) for her dissertation study on persistence in online doctoral students. The survey consists of 27 topics with several sub-questions focusing on persistence and motivation variables. In addition to the survey being used in a previous study on persistence, the survey was also reviewed by an online professor at New Law School and two upper-class online graduate students to assess the survey's validity and reliability. The survey consisted primarily of seven-point Likert scale items and
three open-ended questions. The investigator presented the survey to first-year students enrolled in New Law School's online law school. All active first-year students with at least one semester of enrollment were sent an introductory and invitation email asking them to complete the survey between October 2, 2020, and November 15, 2020. There were a total of 62 students who completed the quantitative survey, and of those, four participants indicated that they would participate in an individual follow-up interview (via Zoom). However, after multiple attempts to schedule an interview with the fourth participant, only three participants completed the follow-up interview.

Phase two of the study consisted of a more substantive qualitative component with semi-structured individual interviews, which resulted in a more in depth understanding of the quantitative responses regarding peer support and the peer tutoring program in particular. The interview questions were adapted from the Ivankova (2014) dissertation study to align more with this study’s sample population of online law students. The individual questions were reviewed by an online professor affiliated with New Law School in order to check for face validity. The resulting quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed, and conclusions were drawn regarding the factors that most impacted first-year students’ persistence and the impact that peer support had on their motivation to persist in the program.

The explanatory sequential design and methodology provide a valuable tool to measure the factors that impact online graduate students and the influence that peer support has on their involvement in the academic community, and their motivation to persist in the program. Also, the design helps to illustrate the tenets of Astin's theory of student involvement (1984), which links the quality and quantity of student involvement to persistence. Furthermore, the design allows for an exploration of students' sense of belonging and community, emphasized in Tinto's
student engagement model (1975, 2017). Finally, the design provides an opportunity to examine the intersectionality of internal motivation, external factors, and peer support, all of which align with Redmond's online engagement framework (2018).

**Significance of the Study**

As mentioned previously, while the volume of research into online education is dense, there is not the same amount of research with respect to online graduate education, particularly online law programs. This study will contribute to the area of research related to online graduate students, particularly online law students who are underrepresented in higher education research (Huffman, 2015; Dutton et al., 2019). Also, I hope this study will contribute to understanding the factors that impact persistence and provide insight into effective interventions, such as peer mentoring, that may increase persistence and thereby lower the attrition rate amongst online graduate students.

This study will be instructive to institutions offering online law programs and online graduate programs in general. Understanding the factors that impact retention and persistence is necessary for administrators, but it is also incumbent upon academics to understand the problem and focus on solutions that address the problems (Thalluri et al., 2014). This study's findings will help New Law School improve its student support programming and cultivate an online environment that encourages and supports student engagement.

**Limitations**

Mixed method studies are still relatively new, and validity is a concern that is often raised in mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Validity in mixed methods research refers to the strategies used to identify potential threats, drawing correct inferences and accurate
assessments from the integrated data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). No study is without limitations or threats, but the following are a few of the identified limitations of this study,

1) **Convenience Sampling.** A limitation of this study is the use of convenience sampling in this study. The participants in the study are students within the program in which the principal investigator is an administrator. Due to the limited sample size, the researcher cannot state with confidence that the results are representative of population (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

2) **Personal Bias.** As the principal investigator and the sole reviewer of the qualitative data, there is a potential that the findings may be subject to a different interpretation from other readers.

3) **Participant Bias.** There is the potential that participants may have been hesitant to be very forthcoming with their responses, particularly qualitative responses because the principal investigator is also an administrator in the program. This threat was mitigated by the principal investigator anonymizing all survey responses and including a disclaimer in the consent letter that stated all responses would not factor into a student's grade or treatment in the academic program.

4) **Limited Qualitative data.** The sample size of the qualitative portion of the study was limited. There were sixty-two participants in the quantitative study, but only eight participants indicated that they participated in the peer study groups, a qualifying criterion for phase two. Of those eight participants, only three participants agreed to a follow-up interview which impacted the generalizability of the findings and limited the type of comparative analysis that could have been completed had the sample size been larger.

**Terms and Definitions**

**Active students.** Active students are currently enrolled in the Juris Doctorate or Executive Juris doctorate program (a professional legal program that does not lead to licensure).
These students are not on academic probation. Students that are active but are on academic probation (having a cumulative GPA of less than 2.5) are designated as active probation students.

**Attrition.** Like other terms related to online student engagement, attrition is not well defined in the literature (Xavier & Meneses, 2020). However, most research defines attrition as failing to complete or not continuing a course or program (Xavier & Meneses, 2020). This study will use that definition, with the caveat, attrition can be voluntary or involuntary (i.e., academic dismissal).

**Cooperative learning** is the pedagogical practice of structuring learning activities with two or more persons in small groups of students who work together to achieve a stated goal of the activity (Madland & Richards, 2017).

**Collaborative engagement** is related to the development of different relationships and networks that support learning, including collaboration with peers, instructors, industry, and the educational institution (Redmond et al., 2018).

**Distance education** uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the student and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously (Seaman et al., 2018; NCES, 2020).

**Non-traditional student** is a student who is older than 24, who does not live in a campus residence (e.g., is a commuter), or is a part-time student, or some combination of these three factors; is not greatly influenced by the social environment of the institution; and is chiefly concerned with the institution's academic offerings (especially courses, certification, and degrees) (Bean & Metzner, 1985).
**Peer mentors.** One of the problems with examining online peer mentor programs' impact is the lack of consistency within the research in defining the term (Lowery et al., 2018). Lowery et al. (2018) reviewed four different studies, and each had different definitions for the meaning of mentoring. However, two peer mentoring designs emerged most from the literature. First was the design of more experienced students mentoring less experienced students. Second, consisted of students who mentored each other while at the same stage of the program (Lowery et al., 2018). In this study, the first peer mentor design was reviewed as first-year students are mentored by upper-class students at New Law School.

**Persistence** has been defined in numerous ways, although it has primarily been used as a synonym for course completion (Lehan et al., 2018). Hart (2012) defined persistence as the actual act of progressing through an online program for at least one term, despite obstacles or adverse circumstances. In the present study, a broader definition of persistence was used to allow for the examination of the longer-term effect of peer mentoring on student success. Specifically, persistence was defined as the continued pursuit of a student in a law degree program leading toward completion of the program and operationalized as remaining continuously active in the program for at least six to nine months post the first term of enrollment.

**Retention,** like other terms used to examine attrition in online education, has inconsistent meanings within the literature but the most common definition is “student progress or continuous enrollment in the next year” (Xavier & Meneses, 2020).

**Sense of belonging** refers to a shared sense of socially constructed meaning that provides a sense of security or relatedness among individuals—that relatedness becomes the glue that connects individuals in a group (Strayhorn, 2018). Belonging is feeling accepted by others, feeling valued as a contributor to a defined group in a particular social context (Strayhorn, 2018).
**Social Engagement** refers to students' participation in academic and non-academic activities outside the virtual classroom, such as recreation or social functions, along with social discussions (Redmond et al., 2018).

**Student Involvement** is the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1984).

**Summary**

There has been limited research on persistence and online graduate students; this study will add to the scarcity of literature in that area. More importantly, this study will examine an area that is even more overlooked: the influence of peer support on online graduate students' persistence. Although there is significant research that examines the impact of various internal and external factors on student persistence, not enough attention is given to how those factors influence peer engagement. This study will examine how peer support influences students' sense of belonging, goal commitment, and self-efficacy, all of which are essential persistence factors. Finally, this study will provide online graduate program administrators with insights that will improve student services programming and, ultimately, improve online graduate students' persistence and retention rates.
Chapter 2

Background

Part of the "Great Society" policy of the 1960s was to elevate the promise of education as being the great equalizer and a necessity to achieving upward mobility (Horsford, 2017; Goodman et al., 2019). However, traditional brick and mortar schools' cost and fixed location make it difficult for many to further their education (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Online education has alleviated some of the barriers to higher education and opened the door for a more diverse set of students to attain their degrees (Yeboah & Smith, 2016; Goodman et al., 2019). Online education has advanced education so much that in 2016 more than three million students were engaged in fully online course work, representing one in seven of all higher education students (Seaman et al., 2018).

Despite the massive explosion of online courses in higher education, online programs were not always favored and were initially branded as being a less rigorous academic option for older students, and most programs were confined to for-profit institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Lederman, 2018; Goodman et al., 2019). However, over the years, that trend has changed, and public, not-for-profit institutions lead the path in online course offerings (Seaman et al., 2018). Instead of attending brick and mortar institutions to further their education, traditional and nontraditional students are increasingly enrolling in online educational programs at public and private institutions (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ortagus, 2016; Kuo & Belland, 2016). While most online students are in undergraduate programs, there is an increase in online graduate programs. As of 2016, over a million students enrolled in online graduate programs (Seaman et al., 2018).

The online student demographics are different from the "traditional" undergraduate/brick-and-mortar student as well. Online programs are dominated by older, lower-income, and
historically marginalized students. According to the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) 2018 data, almost half of online students are female, more than half of the students are over the age of 30, and more than 50% of students identify with a historically marginalized racial/ethnic group. Online learning has seemingly lifted access barriers for students who previously may have had hurdles in achieving a higher education. However, access does not equate to achievement, and many programs are not doing enough to retain and graduate those students (Boston et al., 2011; Hart, 2012; Gaytan, 2015; Su & Waugh, 2018).

Despite the growing number of students engaged in online higher education, online students’ attrition rate is almost six to seven times higher in online programs (Boston et al., 2011; Hart, 2012; Gaytan, 2015). High attrition is not limited to undergraduate programs either; online graduate students are more likely to drop out of their programs than undergraduate students (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Bawa, 2016). It is estimated that 50% of all graduate students leave their programs before completing their degree (Strayhorn, 2018). Considering the high attrition rate for many online institutions, retention is a top priority for most higher education institutions (Gaytan, 2015). Retention in higher education is such an important issue that the U.S. government created a $2.5 billion grant program to help states improve college completion rates, which included retention in online programs (Gaytan, 2015).

Although colleges are receiving a considerable amount of resources to address retention, there is not enough research on student retention and persistence in online settings, particularly graduate online programs (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ortagus, 2016; Watkins-Lewis, 2016; Kuo & Belland, 2016). The research that has been done in this area supports the assertion that there are a variety of external and internal factors that impact adult online student persistence, and
those factors are more nuanced than that faced by traditional brick and mortar schools (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Ke & Xie, 2009).

This study will focus on online graduate education to understand the dynamics of persistence and retention in this growing space of online graduate education. This study will examine persistence in an online law program; however, the law school population's challenges can be extended to other students in online graduate programs. The demographics of online law programs and other online graduate programs are very similar; in that they are mostly older, working adults seeking career advancements. Thus, while there may be some pedagogical characteristics unique to online law school programs, the factors that impact persistence and retention in online law schools are the same as those that impact other online graduate students.

**Growth of Online Graduate Programs**

As mentioned earlier, most online learning research focuses on undergraduate programs; however, there is a growing need for an increased review of online graduate learners and the challenges these students have surrounding retention and graduation (Strayhorn, 2018). Online programs address several needs in our society, but one of the more salient needs is the access to education that it provides older and working adults (Kumar et al., 2017). In addition to providing cost savings, online programs provide students convenience with their time and geographic flexibility, two of the primary reasons there has been rapid growth in distance learning (Kumar et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017).

Traditionally MBA programs were the leading online programs in enrollment (Kumar et al., 2017). However, other disciplines are having a robust enrollment growth due to the flexibility and cost savings of online education (Kumar et al., 2017). For example, Georgia Tech, which has
one of the most prestigious computer science programs in the country, started its online program in 2014, and it is estimated that nearly 1,200 students enroll in that program every year (Goodman et al., 2019). The robust enrollment at Georgia Tech is due, in part, to the fact that their online tuition is currently approximately $7000, whereas the in-person out-of-state student pays close to $45,000 for tuition and fees (Goodman et al., 2019). Cost savings and other benefits are significant reasons why online graduate programs grew over 17% between 2012 and 2016 (Seaman et al., 2018). However, that growth did not extend to law schools until recently.

The increase in online graduate programs has even extended to law schools, which historically has been one of the few disciplines to reject online education (Dutton et al., 2019). In fact, before 1997, no law schools offered online courses as a part of their curriculum. That changed when the American Bar Association (ABA) amended its regulations to allow law schools to offer a few online courses in 1998 (Dutton et al., 2019). Fast forward twenty-two years and the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has forced almost all law schools to deliver their programs online. This is a vast shift from 2018 when only 30 of the top 100 law schools offered online courses as a part of their law school curriculum (Dutton et al., 2019). Now that almost all law schools are joining the ranks of most postbaccalaureate programs and offering some or all of their programs online, it is imperative that those schools also begin to consider student support in an online environment.

**Review of the Literature**

As stated previously, attrition in online graduate programs is significantly higher than in undergraduate programs, with some programs having as much as a 50% attrition rate (Strayhorn, 2018). Unfortunately, the bulk of the research on online retention and persistence involves undergraduate programs (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). This study will provide a review of the
limited literature that examines the retention and persistence of online graduate students and provide additional insights into this population. For example, in a study of online graduate students conducted by Illgaz and Gulbahar (2015), the researchers concluded that students' motivation was positively impacted by access to faculty, instructional content, communication and interaction with other peers, and instructional content. Faculty interaction and interaction with peers are themes that are not uncommon with students in general. However, they are essential for online graduate students who are physically distant from faculty and peers and often need that additional support to feel connected to their program and be successful (Fedynich et al., 2015).

**Sense of Belonging Impacts Retention**

Interaction with faculty and peers relates to a student's sense of belonging, and the extent to which a student has those connections impacts how engaged they are with the academic community. Online students are typically considered nontraditional students and are viewed as being different from traditional students because of their age and other demographics. However, the more salient difference is that these students are distinguished by the lessened intensity and duration of their interaction with faculty and peers at their academic institutions. This lessened duration of interaction significantly impacts their attrition rates (Bean & Metzer, 1985). In brick and mortar programs, student motivation and retention are impacted by how institutions cultivate a demonstratively welcoming environment, which could mean having a diversity of social groups or creating curricular and co-curricular programs where students and faculty can interact on a social and academic level (Tinto, 2017). In an online setting, however, it is more challenging to create those same types of opportunities. Furthermore, perhaps due to the increased external personal pressures, adult online learners seem to be less concerned about the
institution creating a culture of campus enjoyment (Yang et al., 2016). Instead, online students are drawn to programs that offer flexibility, faculty support, good technical support, a curriculum where the students perceive they are learning and feel that they are getting their money's worth (Yang et al., 2016; Ortagus, 2016).

Although online students may not readily value peer and faculty interaction, having a sense of belonging and a sense of community are significant factors that have been shown to impact persistence. Rovai and Wighting (2005) found that online graduate students reported social isolation, feelings of hopelessness, and having a social community related to their persistence. Thus, much like in face-to-face settings, online programs must ensure that students feel engaged in a worthwhile learning experience and connected to reduce feelings of alienation and dropout (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). In addition to increasing feelings of social community with peers, faculty interaction is vital to students and helps them develop a sense of connectedness and ultimately impacts student retention (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

Ivankova and Stick (2007) examined the persistence factors of online graduate students and is one of the few studies that also included an in-depth qualitative phase of their study. Their study included 278 doctoral students and sought to examine factors contributing to students' persistence in the online doctoral program. Participants' responses in the Ivankova and Stick (2007) study aligned with the findings of other studies in that they rated faculty interaction, peer interaction, and institutional support as essential factors that contribute to retention.

The Ivankova and Stick (2007) study provided qualitative context to their quantitative analysis by including individual participants' case studies. For example, one participant in the study gave a negative response to the question about advisor support in the quantitative survey.
and provided an in-depth reason for her response in the second phase of the study. During the telephone interview, the participant stated, "I have not found my advisor to be fulfilling in that role. I'm not going to let the advisor stop my persistence or stop my progress in the field." (Ivanhave & Stick, 2007, p. 109). In addition to obtaining an explanation of the participant's unfavorable rating, the researchers also analyzed the email communications between the participant and her advisor, which revealed that 70% of the student's messages were left unanswered (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Ivankova and Stick (2007) concluded, consistent with previous studies, that faculty members and advisors' inadequate responsiveness is a significant factor that contributes to students' sense of belonging and could result in students not persisting in their programs.

**Job Stress Impacts Retention**

Several reasons are posited by scholars that contribute to the high attrition rate amongst online graduate students, such as not feeling a part of a community, lack of faculty support, and lack of peer support. Another factor that is often cited as contributing to attrition is job stress. There is a need for older students to enter the job market sooner than traditional undergraduate students, and often that pressure may result in students dropping or being dismissed from their programs (Kember, 1989). Ironically, the growth of online graduate education is perhaps driven by market demand for skilled, qualified applicants, and that same demand may also be a factor contributing to students leaving their graduate programs (Engel, 2020). The increase of online graduate enrollment is partly due to the promise that an advanced degree will increase marketability and profitability; with some degrees, that promise holds, but for others, not so much (Engel, 2020). For example, online graduates with accounting degrees are among the fastest-growing occupations in the U.S. and are expected to see record job growth over the next
decade (Engel, 2020). Unfortunately, this is not the case for other professions, such as the legal profession, where obtaining a law degree (particularly an online law degree, which typically is not viewed favorably by employers) is no guarantee for lucrative employment (Whistle, 2019). In fact, in a recent Forbes report, it was reported that the median law school debt was $110,000, yet the median salary for lawyers one year after graduation was $53,000 (Whistle, 2019). Thus, with some professions, such as accounting, attaining an advanced degree, whether online or otherwise, boosts one's marketability, and the promise of making a high salary may contribute to their persistence. On the other hand, some degrees, such as a law degree from an online or lower-tier school, may not yield the results that some students hope and may cause students to abandon their educational goals prematurely.

**Peer Support**

Several studies support the assertion that faculty and institutional support are important factors to student retention. (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Peer support is also an important factor in online graduate student persistence (Bunn, 2004; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Fedynich et al., 2015). The benefits of peer support have been well examined in undergraduate settings (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1983), but not enough attention has been given to the value of peer engagement and peer support in graduate programs or in online settings (Hortsmanshof & Conrad, 2003; Cherney et al., 2018). Just as peer support is positively related to student engagement and persistence in brick and mortar settings, the same impact can be present in online settings (De Smet et al., 2008). Peer support may be even more important in online environments because most of the students in that setting are older, have been out of school longer, and could benefit from the additional support and guidance from a peer (Deo & Griffith, 2011). In a study that examined law students enrolled in an online law course, many
students indicated that while they liked an online program's flexibility, they missed the spontaneous interaction with their peers (Dutton et al., 2019). Thus, with the steady increase of online graduate programs, there is a pressing need for focus to be given to the development of peer support in online graduate programs (Brindley et al., 2009; Cherney et al., 2018).

Although online learners may be viewed as solitary and independent learners, which may be true for some, engaging in online study does not equate to them not needing peer support (Cherney et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Brindley et al. (2009) assert that online learners should not be deprived of social interaction because they chose not to come to campus, and education should not be limited to mere access of formal content; rather, it should be a rich experience that provides an opportunity for social connectedness. A rich learning environment provides opportunities for students to engage in interactive collaboration with peers, and such environments have been shown to increase learning outcomes and retention (Brindley et al., 2009; Cherney, 2018). Finally, peer interaction is crucial to a student's sense of belonging, and students who feel connected are more motivated to learn, are more engaged, and have better outcomes.

**Collaborative Learning as Peer Support.** Peer support in online learning environments can occur in several different ways. Two of the more popular methods are collaborative learning groups and peer support/mentors (Brindley et al., 2009; Du et al., 2016; Cherney, 2018). No method is better than the other; instead, the type of engagement depends on the student's needs. Collaborative learning groups can either be group discussions or group projects within courses (Cherney, 2018). In online settings, collaborative learning groups' makeup and purpose vary; however, the groups' ultimate purpose is to work toward a collective goal (Cherney, 2018). Collaborative learning groups allow peers to share and learn from each other and create bonds within the group (Brindley et al., 2009). Also, it can be argued that cooperative learning promotes
a student's motivation because they want to get good grades, but they also want to be a part of the group (Madland & Richards, 2016). However, collaborative learning groups can also be challenging for adult learners who must work with other group members' schedules, which may be in different time zones, and juggle other responsibilities outside of school (Brindley et al., 2009). In order to maximize the effectiveness of collaborative groups, it is important the instructor provides a great deal of guidance to the group on how to work collaboratively, as well as allow them time to bond as a group and establish parameters that work for the group (Brindley et al., 2009). Despite the benefits of group collaboration, it may be a form of engagement that is overwhelming to a new student or a student who works better one on one. In that case, a peer mentor

**Peer Mentors**

Peer mentors provide the personal interaction that faculty members often do not have enough time to give students (Boles et al., 2010). Mentors provide students with information and guidance on how to navigate a new environment, even a virtual one, and offer students a point of contact that is available and not intimidating (Boles et al., 2010). In a study of peer engagement with law school students, a majority of students reported receiving more support from peers than other friends or faculty (Deo & Griffin, 2011). Students also reported that peer mentors helped them feel less alone and helped to alleviate the “sink or swim” mentality of law school (Deo & Griffin, 2011). The key functions of peer mentors are to facilitate discussions in the course, serve as an academic model for peers, and answer questions about the courses. The importance of peer mentors to students, particularly students of color, is critical in helping students persist in their programs (Boles et al., 2010; Du et al., 2016).
Peer mentors and underrepresented students. The impact of peer mentors with underrepresented students should not be overlooked, and because it is a topic of this paper, it bears mentioning since the majority of online students identify with a historically marginalized group. First-generation students, particularly students of color, are susceptible to messages that impact their sense of competency and self-efficacy because they often receive messages from their surroundings which suggest that they are unlikely to succeed or that college is not for them (Tinto, 2020). Thus, having the support of a peer can be a world of difference between a student of color persisting or withdrawing. Peer mentors help students feel less isolated and lead to greater engagement with the institution, even an online institution (Deo & Griffin, 2011). Du et al. (2016) examined the impact of peer support on African-American women in an online program and found that peer mentors positively impacted students' learning outcomes and helped improve their group work. One student from the study stated, "I can't express how important that it is to have good peer support. I believe it is very important to support one another" (p. 951). Similarly, a culturally diverse online graduate student who participated in the Kum-Yeboah et al. (2017) study reported that a collaborative peer group made him feel as if his peers knew him better and that he was able to build more relationships. Some may view peer support as one of the least important factors that contribute to an online students persistence, but for online students, particularly marginalized students, it is an essential factor that helps with developing a sense of belonging and social integration (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Tinto, 2017).

Developing Peer Support Programs in Online Settings

The research supports that peer-to-peer interaction is crucial to student engagement, and academic institutions should cultivate and support those relationships as much as possible. The challenge, however, is how to translate those interactions in an online setting. In brick and mortar
settings, students can seek assistance through student support centers or academic resource centers where the tutoring services are formalized (Lehan et al., 2018); however, it is not as straightforward in online programs. Several factors impact the offering of peer mentoring support, such as student availability and willingness to participate, availability of peer mentors, time zone differences, and difficulty of tracking students (Lehan et al., 2018). Although establishing peer support programs may prove challenging for online programs, online graduate students' high attrition rate necessitates schools rising to the occasion. Unfortunately, there is not a great deal of guidance from the literature on developing peer support programs in graduate programs, particularly online graduate programs (Lehan et al., 2018; Lowery et al., 2018).

One of the problems with developing peer support programs is that there is little consensus on what constitutes peer support. The available research defines and examines peer support from varying perspectives. For example, peer support can be a peer mentoring program or "study buddy" approach (Thalluri et al., 2014) or a peer tutoring program (Lowery et al., 2018), or a formal academic coaching program with lead academic coaches and peer leaders (Lehan et al., 2017; Gaughf & Foster, 2016). Due to the variations in the types of peer programs offered and the focus of content within peer programs, it is not easy to draw specific conclusions from the research. Despite the differences in programs, the research supports the assertion that any type of peer support does make a positive difference with respect to persistence (Lehan et al., 2018; Lowery et al., 2018; Thalluri et al., 2014; Gaughf & Foster, 2016).

**Academic Coaching Peer Support Model**

Lehan et al. (2018) examined the relationship between online graduate students seeking assistance through a learning center and persistence six to nine months later in their academic programs. The learning center was a completely online program and run by professional part-
time academic coaches. The focus of the sessions was on competence in a specific area as opposed to general skills development. During the study, 320 students participated in the study and half of the students actively participated in the learning center support sessions, and the other half were in the same classes but did not participate in learning support sessions. The study found that for those students who participated in the learning center, one hundred and forty remained continuously active, and nine graduated (persisted), whereas five withdrew and six were dismissed (did not persist) (Lehan et al., 2018).

In contrast, in the sample of students that did not participate in the learning center, 129 students remained continuously active, and nine graduated, whereas seven withdrew and fifteen were dismissed. The authors controlled for such variables as the length of enrollment and GPA and found that visiting the learning center increased the odds of persisting by a small but statistically significant factor (Lehan et al., 2018). This study is an example of how student support improves student persistence, but the study lacked a fuller description of what was reviewed during the tutoring sessions and how the tutor/student relationship developed during those study sessions. It is clear from the researcher's discussion of the study that those areas were not the study's focus but having that information would have provided context around the number of times a student visited the learning center and insight into grade increases or decreases. Also, the learning center coaches were not peers with the students accessing the learning center, which may also have impacted students' utilization of the learning center.

**Peer to Peer Tutoring Model**

Programs that provide professional academic coaches to students are not subordinate to programs that offer peer tutoring programs; however, the difference is that a peer mentor may be viewed differently than someone who has already graduated from the program and is no longer
"living" the student experience. Moreover, a trusting relationship in a peer-to-peer design may develop easier than in an academic coaching design (Lowery et al., 2018). The University of Mississippi tutoring center (UTS) implemented a voluntary peer-to-peer tutoring program for graduate students in the health sciences that involved experienced and successful upper-class students being matched with students who were experiencing academic difficulty (Gaughf & Foster, 2016). Students and peer mentors were allowed to determine on their own how and when they met. Participants were limited to meeting twenty-five hours per semester to ensure that there were resources for all students and that the mentors had time for their own study. Tutors and students met individually or in small groups, and the focus of the sessions was determined based on the needs of the student(s) (Gaughf & Foster, 2016). In this program, tutors were paid a stipend for their services. In addition to tracking participation, student contact, and courses of instruction, the program also required that peer tutors and students evaluated the program via an online tool at the end of each semester. Based on the evaluations collected from the students and mentors, the findings revealed that most students and tutors perceived that their academic performance improved for the courses in which they were tutored (Gaughf & Foster, 2016).

The researchers in the UTS study did not provide a detailed analysis of the program's impact on student's persistence or academic performance. However, they did offer a guide on establishing consistency and reliability within graduate peer tutor programs, which is often lacking in peer support research (Lowery et al., 2018). As stated previously, there is a dearth of literature on peer support programs in online graduate programs, and the limited available research focuses more on the methodology and outcome of the programs (Lowery et al., 2018). Gaughf & Foster's (2016) study fills a gap in the literature by offering replicable recommendations on implementing a successful mentoring program.
Peer Buddies Support Model

Peer support can also be less formal than a mentoring or tutoring program. Sometimes, one supportive person's intervention can positively impact an at-risk student's likelihood of success (Thalluri et al., 2014). As mentioned, several studies have shown that online graduate students enter school with known risks, such as heightened family and work pressures and lower incidences of academic success (Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Redmond et al., 2018). If it is known that students are entering with academic risks, then a good practice would be to pair students with a "buddy" upon enrollment to assist with the transition into school and offer the emotional support needed to adjust to school.

Thalluri and colleagues (2014) studied a group of nursing students in Australia and noted that as many as one-third of students who enter universities in Australia fail to graduate. They also reported that due to many initiatives aimed at increasing diversity within the nursing program, there was an increase in students over the age of 21, an increase of students with a history of poor academic performance, more students with spoken English as a second language, and an increase of students from historically marginalized groups. In short, there was an increase in students entering the nursing program with known academic risks (Thalluri et al., 2014). Thus, administrators were aware of the "root" of the retention problem and needed to implement a plan that would address these issues early in the students' academic program (Thalluri et al., 2014). Administrators in the nursing program chose to implement a peer "study buddy" system instead of an upper-class peer coach model because the buddy model allowed for more personal communication between the participants (Thalluri et al., 2014). The upper-class peer mentor model was problematic because upper-class students had different schedules than first-year students, making it challenging to plan meeting times, and upper-class students had additional
class commitments that made it difficult to commit to the program as well. The "study buddy" system was considered a better model because at-risk students were paired with other students in their cohort, which was thought to be better for community building (Thalluri et al., 2014). Students were academically assessed within the first few weeks of the program, and stronger students were paired with students identified as being at-risk (Thalluri et al., 2014). The students met and worked on the same assignments, and the "study buddies" were trained to be study leaders, and the sessions centered on specific academic topics.

The "study buddy" model initially appears problematic because of the potential for stigmatization of the at-risk students, but the study's outcome proved quite the opposite, and retention in the program improved. Before introducing the "study buddy" program, the average withdrawal rate was 24%, but after the program's implementation, the withdrawals dropped to 21% (Thalluri et al., 2014). Most students that participated in the program overwhelmingly found the program helpful, and the qualitative survey responses supported the positive results. For example, in response to the question about the advantages of the program, Thalluri and colleagues (2014) reported the following comments from at-risk students:

“Knowing that I'm not alone, being able to ask questions in a comfortable environment...helped clarify concepts for me that prepared me for assessments which I wouldn't have been confident about emailing and seeking help from those in higher places.” (p. 99-100). The study leaders commented: “Being a leader allowed me to keep focus on HB1, I gained a sense of involving/belonging in a group & university (positive social impact on me as an individual student), and I met new students in my course. This was helpful because I had few friends in the nursing course.” (p. 99-100).
Although the "study-buddy" model in the Thalluri et al. (2014) study involved brick and mortar graduate students, it is still an excellent example of a graduate peer mentor program that was successful in creating an environment that allows students to connect with peers, fosters a sense of community, and creates a sense of competence for at-risk students, all of which are important to persistence. Thalluri et al.’s (2014) study is also significant because it highlights the importance of peer support with students from historically marginalized backgrounds and the need for early intervention with peer engagement.

**Theoretical Framework**

Research centered around retention and engagement of students is heavily influenced by Tinto's model of student engagement (1975) and Astin's model of student involvement (1984) (Boston, 2011; Ortagus, 2016; Gaytan, 2015). Although Tinto's and Astin's Models on student engagement and persistence are grounded in the undergraduate experience, the tenets of both frameworks provide clear guidance for student persistence in online graduate programs. However, they do not account for the nuanced differences present in online settings (Rovai, 2002; Redmond et al., 2018). Kember (1989) provides a more inclusive framework of the heightened challenges that adult students must address in online educational settings. My research will be viewed through the frameworks of Tinto (1975), Astin (1984), and Kember (1989) to examine student engagement and persistence in an online law program and also draw upon Redmond (2018) and Rovai (2002), who provide current research on the nuances of student persistence in online learning environments.

**Tinto and Astin’s Models of Student Engagement and Involvement**

While Tinto's model of student engagement places the focus more on how the student is engaging with the educational environment and what the institution is doing to foster
engagement, Astin's model of student involvement (1984), on the other hand, places more of an emphasis on "how" much a student is involved in their educational setting as compared to "what" factors affect a student's involvement. Astin's student involvement model (1984) relates student retention to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience and could be characterized as behavioral or action-oriented. The focus is on what the student does to become involved in their academic community.

Astin (1984) identifies five elements in the student involvement theory: 1) involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects; 2) involvement manifests along a continuum and is displayed differently by different students; 3) involvement can be measured quantitatively and qualitatively; 4) amount of student learning is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement; and 5) the effectiveness of any educational policy is proportional to the capacity of that policy to increase student involvement. Astin acknowledges the impact that varying institutional forces have on student involvement, but ultimately, the student involvement theory's foundation is how the student invests their time (Astin, 1984). Moreover, Astin (1984) asserts the importance of educators realizing that they are competing for a share of their time in a student's life. Students are balancing and negotiating the time and energy they invest in family, friends, jobs, and other activities. The investment in those activities directly correlates to a reduction in time and energy that a student has for educational development (Astin, 1984).

Tinto and Astin's models are widely cited in research on student persistence (Kember, 1989; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2002; Alijohani, 2016), and they are sound and relevant models in which to examine the student phenomenon of motivation and persistence. However, Tinto's and Astin's models are limited with respect to online graduate students, particularly older
students who are less influenced by social integration within the university (Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2002; Redmond et al., 2018). Both Tinto's and Astin's models are grounded in research on traditional undergraduate students in brick-and-mortar school settings (Kember, 1989; Alijohnai, 2016). Online education, however, primarily consists of part-time and older adult students who have significant external factors, such as work and family responsibilities (Kember, 1989); thus, these students require a more expanded framework to examine their challenges.

**Kember’s Model of Distance Education**

Kember's model of dropout from distance education (1989) does not discount Tinto's model's relevance, but it does assert that certain variables that are downplayed in Tinto's model should be amplified when examining the persistence of adult learners in online settings. In Kember's model, educational background is downplayed perhaps because adult learners may be several years removed from secondary school (Kember, 1989). Programs with a high number of adult learners may have relaxed or open entry admission processes, which may make finding a link between past academic performance and school results tenuous at best (Kember, 1989). Moreover, Kember (1989) asserts that online learners' educational background may influence later components of the dropout model, but it is not a predictor of success. Kember acknowledges that educational background, particularly for students with little history of formal education, influences a student's academic integration (Kember, 1989).

**Rovai Persistence Model**

Rovai (2003) builds on Tinto's student engagement model and Bean and Metzner's student attrition model (1995) by adapting and explaining the tenets of both in an online setting. Rovai's (2003) model considers student characteristics and skills before admission and external and internal factors impacting students after admission. Several of the factors included in Rovai's
model are consistent with that of Tinto and Kember. However, he introduces the variable of
computing literacy and other competency skills unique to distance learners (Rovai, 2003). For
example, online learners must have independent learning skills. Since online students work
primarily alone, they need to have "information literacy skills," which is the ability to recognize
when information is needed and can locate, evaluate, and effectively use the needed information
(Rovai, 2003). According to Rovai (2003), a deficiency of that skill can lead to academic
difficulties and attrition. Rovai's model (2003) highlights the importance of peer engagement,
which he classifies as an internal factor. Consistent with Tinto's sense of community, he asserts
that online institutions should encourage students to learn from each other and facilitate as many
opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement as possible (Rovai, 2003).

**Redmond Online Engagement Framework**

In more recent research, Redmond and colleagues (2018) posit that student engagement is
a multi-faceted issue that encompasses internal and external factors, but the focus is more on the
student's internal characteristics. Redmond et al.'s (2018) model have five categories: 1) Social
Engagement; 2) Cognitive Engagement; 3) Behavioral Engagement; 4) Collaborative
Engagement; and 5) Emotional Engagement. All of the framework elements presuppose the
independent nature of the online learner, and the criteria of each element require action on behalf
of the online learner. For example, the social engagement element requires that the student build
a community by engaging in an online social forum to build relationships beyond study
requirements (Redmond et al., 2018). The behavioral engagement element also requires active
involvement by the student within the classroom. This element is characterized by students
participating in class, having a positive attitude about learning, and self-regulating their learning.
Redmond et al.'s (2018) framework is similar to Astin's theory which asserts that a student's
engagement is directly proportional to the quantity and quality of their involvement. Each element of the online engagement framework requires that that student take ownership of their engagement. Furthermore, the online engagement framework's significance gives specific examples of what "engagement" looks like in an online setting. The framework operationalizes theory by providing specific skills that students and faculty, and administrators can refer to as guidelines for assessing engagement in an online environment.

**Common Factors Related to Persistence**

Many factors relate to student success, but peer support is probably one of the more important factors (Astin, 1993). Peer groups influence the values, behavior, and academics outcomes of students (Astin, 1993). They also expose students to other peers with similarly focused social and academic goals, which reinforces individual aspirations (Bonner & Bailey, 2006). Tinto (2020) states that a sense of belonging leads to other forms of engagement, such as learning with or from peers, whereas an underdeveloped sense of belonging leads to withdrawal and undermines the motivation to learn. Not only does connecting with peers relate to a student's sense of belonging, but it also has a connection with a student's academic success (Thalluri et al., 2014). Both elements, connection with peers and a sense of belonging, influence other internal factors such as self-efficacy and academic integration.

**Impact of Self-Efficacy on Persistence**

Tinto’s (1975) model of student engagement describes persistence as a manifestation of goals and motivation. Tinto’s framework presumes that each student enters college with their own goals and motivation which are impacted by their experiences in college (Tinto, 1975, 2017). Students’ college experiences impact their sense of self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and perceived value of their curriculum which in turn influences their motivation and persistence. A
key factor in persistence is self-efficacy, which is one’s personal belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation or a specific task (Tinto, 2017). Having a sense of self-efficacy is particularly important for adult learners who may have a history of academic failure and not have any recent memory of academic success (Knowles, 1980). Thus, in educational settings where adults are the primary learners it is important that educators create an environment that allows the adult student to achieve a sense of academic success early on (Knowles, 1980).

**Impact of Sense of Belonging and Community Integration on Persistence**

In addition to self-efficacy, a sense of belonging in a community is also essential to persistence (Tinto, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). A feeling of belonging can be viewed in the larger sense as having an affinity for your institution and more specifically to having a connection to a group of people within the university, department, or field of specialization (Strayhorn, 2018). In fact, smaller and more personal connections are those that seem to be more directly related to students’ motivation to persist within the university (Tinto, 2017). Students' engagement in the classroom is important because it increases their motivation and it increases their willingness to learn and persist (Tinto, 2017). Tinto’s model (1975) posits that a student’s social integration into the educational community is critical to a student’s persistence.

**Goal Commitment and Persistence**

Both Kember and Tinto include goal commitment as a significant factor in persistence. Kember (1989) defines goal commitment as encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation is having an interest in learning for learning’s sake, and extrinsic motivation is linked to the student's commitment to achieving a tangible qualification. (Kember, 1989). Tinto’s goal commitment and Kember's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation relate to Astin’s (1984) assertion that student involvement is directly related to how much value a
student places on a particular outcome. Thus, if a student is motivated to get a good grade in chemistry because they are genuinely interested in that subject, then to the extent, they reach that goal is a direct function of the time they invest in class, labs, and study groups (Astin, 1984). If a student's academic interest aligns with their career needs, intrinsic motivation is heightened and has a greater link with goal commitment (Kember, 1989). Tinto and Kember's models are more psychological, whereas Astin's model is more behavioral and demonstrable.

**Student Involvement as a Continuum**

Astin's development theory model views student involvement as operating on a continuum; that is, involvement ebbs and flows as they progress through their program (Astin, 1984). This idea of student involvement operating on a continuum is in harmony with Kember's longitudinal model (1989), which links student persistence to a student's ability to integrate academics and social components into their lifestyle. In both models, involvement and integration are not viewed as a static event; instead, they are processes that occur over time and are impacted by the services provided by the academic institution and the student's personal events and own level of motivation (Astin, 1984; Kember, 1989).

**Integration of School and External Commitments**

Kember (1989) posits that while Tinto's social integration model in a campus setting cannot be replicated in an online setting, there are parallels that can be drawn with adult online students. Primarily the degree to which students can integrate the demands of external commitments (work, family, friends) with school responsibilities is strongly correlated to their chances of success (Kember, 1989). Furthermore, employer and colleague support is a significant factor in extrinsic motivation and reinforcing a student's goal commitment (Kember, 1989). In addition to employer influence, a critical factor in academic integration is family support
The degree to which a student's immediate family members value a student's educational pursuit is related to the level of support a student will receive from their family (Kember, 1989). If the family does not see school as having a priority over family time, academic integration will not progress smoothly for the student (Kember, 1989).

**Cost Benefit Analysis of Persistence**

The final component in the Kember model is a cost-benefit analysis of persistence (Kember, 1989). Kember's cost-benefit analysis aligns with Tinto's theory that students will direct their energies toward activities that will yield more significant benefits (Tinto, 1975). Students must decide if their time spent in an educational program is worth sacrificing other opportunities for perceived future benefits (Kember, 1989). As suggested in Astin's model (1984), the process of weighing the value of the educational program operates on a continuum. It may manifest in varying degrees of involvement throughout a student's educational program, but resolve may strengthen the closer a student moves toward completion (Kember, 1989). During this time of weighing the cost/benefits analysis, a student decides to drop out (Kember, 1989).

The persistence models of Tinto (1975), Astin (1984), Kember (1989) and Rovai (2003) are synthesized in Figure 1, with the disruptive factors experienced by distance students identified by Bean and Metzer (1985) and the online engagement skills required by Redmond’s framework (2018). The extrinsic variables of family demands, work demands, and age status is more influential on persistence with online students (Kember, 1989) and is identified by the solid link to persistence. Goal commitment is influenced by extrinsic and intrinsic factors and is continuously assessed throughout the academic program (Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003). The degree to which students integrate the external and internal variables will also dictate how successful they are with integrating into the academic environment. A dashed link represents this
association because of the variations of integration. Rovai (2003) and Redmond (2018) build on Astin (1984) and Tinto (1975), and both assert that peer engagement is directly proportional to the amount and quality of student involvement (Rovai, 2003, Redmond, 2018); thus, this tenuous relationship is denoted by a dashed line.

Figure 1
*Online Graduate Student Engagement Model*

While external factors seem to have the most significant influence on the intent to persist (Kember, 1989), intrinsic factors, academic integration, and peer engagement influence a student's persistence in an online program.

Summary

Online education has provided millions of students access to education that perhaps was previously inaccessible. However, online education growth has created a mandate that institutions must place more focus on student persistence and attrition. This mandate was hastened by the challenges presented by the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, which forced most
programs online, including traditional brick and mortar law schools. Like other graduate programs, law schools are now having to consider and respond to those factors that impact online students' persistence. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of research on persistence and online graduate students. However, foundational research on student engagement and involvement by scholars such as Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) provides a framework for examining issues related to online graduate students. Although the elements of Tinto's and Astin's model are not precisely transferrable to an online setting for adult learners, both models are relevant to research on student persistence in online graduate programs. The concepts of sense of belonging, self-efficacy, and peer engagement are foundations for more recent persistence models, such as those by Kember (1989), Rovai (2003), and Redmond (2018), who have adopted the theories of Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) into more relevant frameworks in which to examine adult learners in online settings. I will examine persistence and peer engagement using these frameworks as a lens for interpreting and drawing conclusions from the data gathered in this study.
Chapter 3

Overview

This study examines the impact of peer support on persistence of first-year online law students. A sequential mixed methods design was used, which is a design in which the researcher begins by conducting a quantitative phase and follows up on specific results with a qualitative phase to help explain the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This particular design was chosen because neither a quantitative study or qualitative study would have been sufficient to provide an adequate review of the complexities and nuances involved in graduate students persistence in an online law school program. The inclusion of both a quantitative and qualitative design in this study provides a deeper and broader understanding of persistence in online graduate students that is not typically found in other studies that only use one of the approaches (Kim, 2017).

Quantitative research allows the researcher to ask why something occurs by studying the overall tendency of responses from individuals and to note how this tendency varies among people (Creswell, 2012). Quantitative research is often associated with a postpositivist approach because typically researchers make claims based on focusing on the interrelation of select variables, cause and effect thinking, or detailed observations and measures of variables (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Researchers in quantitative studies are usually investigating the themes and trends of similar previous studies, however they are also free to determine which variables to investigate, select specific instruments that are appropriate for their study and that will produce reliable and valid results. In quantitative studies the results are interpreted in reference to one’s initial hypothesis or prior studies (Creswell, 2012).
In contrast to the generalizations that are possible with a quantitative study, a qualitative study allows the researcher to highlight variations in responses that are not adequately captured in a pure quantitative study. A qualitative study allows the researcher to examine the multiple realities of different individuals (Lichtman, 2013). Researchers who engage in qualitative work are doing so to capture the deeper perspectives that can only be captured through face to face interviews and observations in the natural setting. (Marshall & Rossman, 2013). Unlike in quantitative research where researchers are relying upon past research to prove or disprove a hypothesis, qualitative research relies upon the participants to construct knowledge (Creswell, 2012).

This study is an explanatory sequential design and combines elements of a mixed methods case study. The explanatory sequential design is one of the most straightforward mixed methods designs and, as the name implies, the intent of this design is to follow initial quantitative results with qualitative data to explain the significance (or lack thereof) of the quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). In addition to providing an explanation for quantitative findings, mixed methods studies are used to augment the validity of the findings, inform the collection of the data source and assist with knowledge creation (Kim, 2017). The first phase of the design includes collecting and analyzing quantitative data and the second phase relies upon the first phase. The intermediary phase between the quantitative results and qualitative follow up is referred to as integration. Integration is where the researcher identifies quantitative results that call for additional explanation and from those results develops the qualitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). It is at this point where qualitative questions are developed or refined.

As previously mentioned, this study employs the elements of a case study design because the data from the quantitative and qualitative phases were integrated during the interpretation of
the outcomes of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). Because this was a study examining the impact of peer engagement and peer support on persistence, the researcher purposefully focused only on those participants that indicated participation in the peer study groups during the quantitative phase. As will be discussed later, the selection of which peer participants to select for the case was fairly straightforward due to the small number of participants that indicated participation in a peer study group.

Often times mixed methods studies tend to have a preference for one design, either quantitative or qualitative, with more emphasis being given to a particular phase of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The intent of this study was to assess what impact, if any, peer support has on online law students persistence. However, the greater focus is on the in-depth explanations provided by the case study analysis, which will offer insight into how particular factors impact students’ persistence.

**Target Population**

The target population in this study were students enrolled in the first-year online Juris Doctorate (JD) and Executive Juris Doctorate (EJD) program and actively taking classes from January 2020 thru September 2020 and had completed at least one term in the JD/EJD Program. Students were recruited via an email asking for their participation in the study (see appendix A). Students’ academic status depended on the program in which they were enrolled and the number of completed courses during the term. Students in the JD program must maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.5 by the end of their first-year. If they are below a 2.5 after the first term, they are considered a probationary student. Students in the EJD program must maintain a cumulative GPA of 1.70 and if they are below that after the first term, they are considered a probationary student. JD and EJD students on probation have three terms to meet the academic standards or
they are dismissed from the program. It should also be noted that due to the structure of the program, some first-year students may have previously been enrolled in the JD or EJD program and either took a leave of absence or were dismissed and after a certain period of time chose to reenroll in the program.

The criteria for selecting the participants was 1) being a JD or EJD student; 2) being enrolled in the first or second term of the first-year of the program; 3) being in either an active or probation status; 4) for those students who may have restarted the JD or EJD program, restarting the first or second term of the first-year. A total of 209 students met the criteria. There were 168 Juris Doctorate students and 41 Executive Juris doctorate students invited to participate in the study.

Participants in the Study

Participants in this study include a representative sample of all active students enrolled in the Fall 2020 JD/EJD program at New Law School. The criteria for selecting participants included: 1) being an active part-time student in the JD/EJD program; 2) being active during the time period of Spring 2020-Spring 2021; 3) being in the first-year of the JD/EJD program; 4) must have completed at least one term in the JD/EJD program.

New Law School has approximately 337 students enrolled in the first-year of the JD/EJD program; of those students 209 were identified as active-probation, active-non-probation students and were sent an email to participate in the study. Because New Law School has a flexible admission policy and several regulatory compliance requirements, some students may be designated as first-year students but may be in a leave status pending reentry. Thus, the enrollment number often differs from the active number of students. When using convenience sampling, Creswell (2012) suggests at least 30 participants are needed for correlational studies.
Of the 209 students who were sent an email to participate in the quantitative survey, there were 62 responses for a response rate of 30%.

Setting

This study examines graduate students in a fully online law school program. A primary reason for the selection of this site is convenience. The law school is a part of a large midwestern research institution, which has one of the largest online universities in the country and has one of the few fully online law schools. In addition to convenience, the site was selected because it is one of the oldest fully online universities in the country and thus has a large student body, which increased the opportunity for a larger sample size. Because the students enrolled at New Law School are very familiar with online technology, conducting online surveys and virtual individual interviews did not pose any difficulty for participants.

Students at New Law School are either in the 4-year part-time program designed for those who want to be licensed attorneys or a 3-year part-time program designed for those who want advanced legal training but do not want to practice law. Students enrolled at New Law School must take an entrance exam, similar to the national law school admissions test (LSAT). The typical student at New Law School is someone who usually did not qualify for admission at an ABA approved school based upon admission test scores or someone that does not want a traditional brick and mortar law school setting because of work demands or geographic constraints. The common profile of a New Law School student is a working professional (average age is 43) who, due to work or family commitments, geography, or other life circumstances, cannot make a traditional legal education fit into their lives. At the time of this study, all JD students enrolled in New Law School were required to pass a first-year regulatory exam administered by the California Board of Bar Examiners in order to progress to the second
year of the program. Students have three attempts to pass the exam; if they do not pass within that time frame they are immediately dismissed from the JD program.

Although not required, students are encouraged to form study groups not only to address the concern of isolation for online learners but to also help with the understanding of difficult legal concepts. First-year students are particularly encouraged to join study groups to help prepare for the first-year state exam. Members of the student organization, the Student Bar Association (SBA), organize to form weekly semi-structured student lead study groups to help first-year students with first-year classes and prepare for the regulatory exam. The study group sessions are not mandatory and all first-year students are invited to attend the sessions which occur every Sunday afternoon. The study sessions are led by upper-class students who have passed the mandatory first-year exam.

**Research Bias**

The idea for this research study was prompted from the researcher’s role as an administrator at New Law School and as a long-time administrator in law school settings. It should also be noted that the researcher also attended law school as an older student, although not an online law school. While the researcher shares many similarities with the participants in this study, having been an older minority student, she never had to navigate law school online while balancing work and family commitments. In addition to working as an administrator at New Law School, the researcher closely works with students on academic matters and assists with administrative functions related to hosting the first-year study sessions.

**Quantitative Survey Instrument**

The first phase of the study consisted of a twenty-seven question survey (See appendix B) developed by Natalyia Ivankova (2004) for her study on persistence of doctoral candidates
within a higher education program. The survey was adapted to be reflective of the online law school population and the law school program. The first question of the survey was an informed consent question. Questions two through six focused on the current academic status of the participant. Questions 7 through 13 focused primarily on revealing the predictive power of selected external and internal factors which align with the factors prevalent in the theoretical framework. For example, question eight is meant to gauge the impact that certain external factors have on students persistence within their program. Question nine is related to the value that students place on their experiences while in the program. The process of weighing the benefits of one’s educational experience is an element present in both Kember’s (1989) and Astin’s (1984) student engagement theories and is an important factor to consider when examining student persistence. Question 11 is more of a value question as well, but the purpose of the question is to evaluate how a student experiences institutional support within the program.

As an online program, a factor that is related to persistence is a student’s ability to navigate an online environment independently (Rovai, 2003). A common characteristic of online students is that they are older and frequently have long gaps in their education, which may impact their competence level in an online setting (Kember, 1989). The questions in section three of the survey were designed to assess the level of competence that online students assign to their ability to successfully work independently and navigate online learning.

Having a feeling of competency is related to one’s motivation to persist in their educational program and the questions in section five are related to a student’s level of motivation to pursue the law degree and continue in the law program. A student’s motivation is also impacted by the amount of support received from family, colleagues, and friends (Kember, 1989). Section six asks a number of Likert scale questions designed to assess how students
experience various external factors, such as spousal relationships, work, finances, and friendships.

The central focus of this study is peer relationships, specifically the influence of peer support on persistence. Thus, there are 19 variables included in question 16 that attempt to give a fuller perspective of participants’ assessment of their engagement with peers and the impact of peer relationships on their academic and non-academic performance in the law school program. The researcher used the survey responses to questions 14, 15, and 16 to not only identify participants for phase two of the study, but also as context to frame the follow-up interviews with the phase two participants.

**Qualitative Survey Instrument**

The goal of phase two of the study was to give context to explain certain internal and external factors revealed in the quantitative phase of the study. Phase two of the study involved individual semi-structured interviews with three students who indicated they had participated in student led study sessions. The researcher used an interview protocol (see appendix C) which included nine questions that were responsive to the results of the quantitative analysis and include variables related to self-motivation, program goals, peer support, and other interview questions based on interview protocols from previous qualitative persistence studies (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Yang et al., 2017). The purpose of having the second qualitative phase was twofold: 1) to provide more depth to the quantitative analysis from phase one and 2) to add to the literature on online graduate students, which is lacking in the inclusion of student perspectives.

**Threats to Validity and Reliability**

In a sequential mixed methods designs, where one study strand builds on another, the quality of the inferences produced in one study strand may markedly affect the quality of the
inferences generated in another strand (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori, & Teddlie, 2009). Ultimately, the quality of the meta-inferences from the overall study may be affected (Ivankova, 2014). Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) refer to the importance of mixed methods studies being able to draw correct inferences and accurate assessments from the integrated data. In interpreting the results from both the quantitative and qualitative data, this researcher was conscious of all possibilities for explaining the results, including significant and non-significant predictors and attempted to include alternative perspectives when relevant.

In addition to considering reasonable possibilities when making inferences between the qualitative and quantitative data, Ivankova (2014) provides another strategy for improving the validity in mixed methods studies. For example, with respect to selecting participants for qualitative follow-up, Ivankova (2014) suggests that one should look for consistency of students’ responses on the different measures and identify contradictory patterns. It is also important that the researcher explore the reasons for inconsistent and extreme scores on measures. Finally, Ivankova (2014) notes that although quantitative-qualitative studies are usually linear, it is important to be aware of possible interaction between the two strands. That is, the researcher should be aware when the qualitative findings may reveal the need for additional statistical examination of the quantitative data, which may serve to better understand the qualitative results. Below is a visual display of Ivankova’s study (2014), which demonstrates the process of how to ensure meta inferences are valid and justified. This study utilized this data collection and analysis design to address and strengthen threats to validity and reliability.
**Figure 2**
*Visual model of study design and procedure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUAN</th>
<th>QUAN</th>
<th>Connect</th>
<th>Qual</th>
<th>Qual</th>
<th>Integrate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online Survey N=62</td>
<td>Descriptive /ANOVA Statistical Analysis</td>
<td>Sample selection. Interview protocol</td>
<td>Individual Zoom Interviews N=3</td>
<td>Coding and thematic analysis</td>
<td>Interpretation based on QUAN and qual results</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection Procedures**

Phase one of the study consisted of the researcher sending an email to all active first-year JD and EJD students who have completed at least one term in the JD/EJD program explaining the study and the goals of the project. The email contained a link to the survey and an informed consent letter (see appendix D). If participants were willing to participate in the study, they would click on the link which directed them to the informed consent page and then the survey. The survey was open from October 1, 2020 thru November 15, 2020. A reminder email was sent to participants on October 25, 2020 encouraging them to complete the survey. The survey was closed on November 15, 2020. At that point, the researcher closed the survey and reviewed the data and began coding the data for quantitative analysis. The survey results were also reviewed to select participants who responded yes to the question regarding participation in the peer led study groups, which was identifying criteria for phase two of the study.

The researcher used anonymous identification numbers of participants who participated in the peer groups and entered them into the program minwebtool.com, which randomly selected participants using an online random generator. The minwebtool.com program uses a three-step
randomization process to ensure that the selected persons are truly random. The imputed names are submitted line by line on the server. Then the server uses a Python random module to generate one pseudo-random number between one and the total number of names entered into the program. Then it will choose the name with this random number as the selected person. For security measures, none of the participants’ information is stored in the program. The anonymous identification numbers were matched with the participants names and emails and on November 28, 2020 an email was sent to participants inviting them for a follow-up interview (see appendix E).

Phase two of the study consisted of individual interviews of three participants that participated in the peer study groups for at least four sessions. The interview questions were reflective of the results of the quantitative analysis and asked participants to give more detail surrounding the topics asked in the survey. Questions included variables related to self-motivation, program goals, peer support, and institutional support. The individual interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded with the participants permission. The follow up interviews lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

**Quantitative Analysis**

The results of the quantitative survey were analyzed using the SPSS data analysis program. Descriptive analysis for each section and sub-section of the survey was run using SPSS. Descriptive analysis of the various participant responses were analyzed and, where possible, one-way ANOVAs and bivariate correlations were run to compare the responses of different participant cohorts (e.g. probation, non-probation, peer group participants, non-peer group participants, age, family status). These descriptive statistics illustrated the perceptions that
students had about work demands, peer support, institutional support, self-efficacy, and skills competency and how those variables impacted their persistence and peer engagement.

**Qualitative Analysis**

The WAV audio files were automatically transcribed within Zoom. The researcher proofread and edited the Zoom transcriptions to ensure accuracy of the qualitative data and then coded the transcribed data using the Dedoose program. After the transcripts were coded, the data was reviewed again for themes that aligned with the theoretical framework of the study and also any emergent themes that may not have been indicated within the framework.

**Limitations**

First, only graduate students at one online university were included in the sample. Therefore, the extent to which these findings may be generalized to students outside of this university is unclear. Second, confounding variables, such as motivation, anxiety, job flexibility, sense of rapport, sense of isolation, and family obligations, were not controlled for and may impact persistence. Third, a standardized approach to peer mentoring was not employed, and no analysis was performed to determine if differences existed between peer leader’s groups. Similarly, the relationship between the peer leader and the students in the group was not measured. As noted earlier, participants in this study included both JD and EJD students. Although the first year of the program is substantively the same for both types of student, after the first year the EJD program is not as restrictive as the JD program and students have a lower GPA requirement. It is possible that some of the variance in persistence was explained by the different status of the peer group participants and the peer group leader (Lehman, 2018). Finally, although 62 participants responded, only eight participants indicated that they had participated in the peer led study groups. The unequal number of students in the peer-study group and non-peer
study group, limited the opportunity for correlational analysis, and impacted the ability to draw any strong conclusions about the impact of peer led study groups on engagement and persistence.

**Ethical Considerations**

Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) identify reciprocity to participants, handling of sensitive data, disclosure of the purpose of the study, and consistency of data collection as potential ethical concerns. With respect to handling sensitive data, the participants were assigned an encrypted anonymized number to protect their identity. Sensitive data was stored in a secure and password protected cloud-based file. The purpose of the study was disclosed to participants at the onset of the study and they were informed that if at any time they chose not to participate, they would be released from the study. Creswell and Plano Clark (2017) suggest having a standardized way to collect data which is explicitly described to avoid inconsistency in data collection. As a single researcher, I did not have an issue with inconsistency with data collection, but I did notate my data collection processes.

**Summary**

Notwithstanding the noted limitations, this mixed methods study provides insightful data regarding the impact of external and internal factors on persistence of online graduate students. Particularly, this study offers data regarding participants’ perspectives on the importance of peer support to their persistence in an online law school program. The findings from this study inform the principal investigator’s recommendations on strategies to improve student engagement with peer support groups, thereby improving persistence. In addition, this study will contribute to the lack of research on persistence of online graduate students, particularly students in online law programs. As online graduate programs continue to grow and as law schools have been forced online due to the Coronavirus pandemic, this study will offer insights on the factors that impact
students’ ability to fully integrate into their academic institution, provide analysis that will help to better understand those factors, and offer student support models that may be implemented to improve persistence.
Chapter 4

Results

The quantitative research question in this study is *What is the influence of peer engagement on student persistence in an online law school program?* This encompasses several variables which were included in the first phase of the study. Students age, family structure, work demands, school status were considered independent external variables and thought to be influential upon the outcome of student persistence. In addition, selected internal variables that have been shown to contribute to students’ persistence were also included in the study. For example, internal variables such as sense of belonging and community, peer interaction, faculty engagement, and self-motivation are considered predictive variables that influence student engagement and persistence and were included in the survey (Tinto, 1975; Astin, 1983; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Fedynich et al., 2015).

Phase two of the study consisted of individual interviews and focused on the question, *How has your experience with peers in the program impacted persistence in the online law school program?* During phase two, participants were selected based on their response to questions 14 and 15 in the survey, which asked about their engagement in peer study groups and how many groups they attended. The resulting data described herein offer insight into the factors that online law school students identify as significant or non-significant. Furthermore, the data highlights the impact of peer study groups on peer engagement and persistence.

The first phase of this study included a seven part survey which consisted of several Likert scale questions for each section. Each section of the survey focused on different areas that have been found to impact online student engagement and persistence. This chapter will address each part of the survey and the relevant questions in detail. The first section of this chapter will
address the external variables in the first, second, fourth, and sixth sections of the survey. Those sections addressed areas such as family and friend support, employer support, faculty support, fellow student interaction, and advising support and asked participants to rate how those considerations impact their persistence in the program. The second part of the survey focused on external program variables as well and asked participants more directed questions about their experiences in those areas. For example, students were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree, how they would rate the following: if the program is meeting their expectations, how challenging the courses are academically, or how isolated they feel in the online classroom. The second segment of the survey served to give more depth to the broader areas surveyed in the first section of the survey and will be discussed within the first section of the chapter as well.

The second half of this chapter addresses the internal variables that impact student persistence. Sections three and five of the survey asked participants to assess their level of comfort with studying in an online program and to also assess their level of motivation with respect to persisting in the program. Having a sense of self-efficacy and goal commitment are two central factors that are related to an online student’s persistence (Kember, 1989; Tinto, 2017). Further, the more that a student is intrinsically motivated there is an increased probability that the student will remain committed to their academic and career goals (Astin, 1984). Strong goal commitment and self-motivation are also related to a student engagement with the institution and with peers (Astin, 1984). Peer engagement was the final part of the survey and will be the final section of this chapter. Participants who participated in this part of the survey were students that actively participated in at least one peer support study group. The data collected in phase one of the study indicated that only eight participants had participated in at
least one peer lead study group and were eligible to be in phase two of the study. The final section of this chapter will explore the survey responses of participants who participated in the peer groups and also include the qualitative data collected from those participants as well.

**Descriptive Statistics of the Survey Participants**

There were a total of 62 participants in the quantitative phase of the study and of those it was almost an even split between genders with 46.8% female and 45.2% male. Participants varied in age: Twelve percent were under 25 years old; Thirty percent were between 25-35; Thirty five percent were between 36-45; almost ten percent were between 46-54; and one percent was over 55 years old. The family status of the participants varied as well with twenty five percent being married with children over 18; twenty seven percent were married with children under 18; twenty one percent were single parents with children under 18; six percent were single parents with children over 18; and nineteen percent were single with no children. As this is an online program meant to offer flexibility to working adults, it was not surprising that seventy one percent of participants worked full time jobs, eight percent worked part-time and twenty one percent were unemployed.

New Law School has three admissions cycles and students enter the program in January, May, or September. Depending on whether a student is enrolled in the JD or EJD program they are required to maintain a cumulative GPA of 2.5 or 1.7 respectively and have varying course credit requirements. Students are dismissed for failure to maintain academic standards or for failure to meet attendance requirements. However, with a showing of extenuating circumstances students may be allowed to reenroll if dismissed for academic reasons or if they withdraw for personal reasons. If a student is dismissed for academic reasons and reenrolls they are placed on probation. If a student falls below the minimum cumulative GPA for one semester, they are
placed on academic probation and have two terms to raise their cumulative GPA or they will be dismissed. It is possible that these variances in the law program may contribute to students’ persistence. However, it is more likely that the persistence factors for EJD and JD students are more similar than dissimilar particularly in the first year where the program is substantially the same. In this study, 80% of the students were new students, meaning they did not have a prior enrollment and 19% of the students were students were returning students, meaning they had some type of prior enrollment at New Law School. Also, 17% of the participants were on academic probation.

Table 1

Participants Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Variables</th>
<th>Active/Non Probation</th>
<th>Probation</th>
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<td>1: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>2: 13</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4-Single with children &gt;18</td>
<td>5: 11</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployed: 10</td>
<td>Unemployed: 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N=61 and missing =1
External Factors Impact on Persistence and Engagement

The first substantive question in the survey asked students to identify which factors were most important to them in their ability to persist. This section was designed to provide a general overview of what participants deemed to be the most or least important with respect to their persistence. Participants were asked to select external variables they considered to be most important to their persistence in an online law program. The variables were work, family, convenience, flexibility, cost, program quality, program offerings, program prestige, career advancement, online learning environment, learning characteristic preference, and access to technology. The subsequent questions in the survey were designed to provide further context to those general topics and offer insight into what participants considered to be important or not important with respect to persistence and engagement.

Overall, participants’ responses to question one was consistent with the factors identified in the current literature on persistence and distance education. For example, and not surprisingly since this is an online program, 83% of the participants indicated that access to technology was the most important factor to their ability to persist (Rovai, 2003; 2018). In addition, 67% of participants indicated that the program fitting their learning characteristic was important and 63% indicated that the program course offerings were important. Also consistent with the research was the importance of family considerations, which was selected by 56% of the participants as being very important. It was surprising, however, that family concerns did not rank higher with participants. Also, 40% of participants indicated that cost was a significant factor in their persistence. As most of the students in the program are older and are usually mid-career professionals, it was not surprising that 53% of the participants indicated that career advancement was a significant factor. It was somewhat surprising that only 24% of participants
selected program flexibility and 38% of participants selected program convenience as significant factors to persistence, considering that these are factors that typically draw students to online programs. Again, the first section of the survey provided participants with general themes that have been shown to impact persistence, but the second set of questions expanded upon those themes and allowed participants to rank the importance of select key areas.

*Family Support*

Although family support was only chosen by 56% of the participants as being a significant factor in their persistence, Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that external factors such as family and friend support are pivotal to persistence of distance learners, which makes it surprising that this factor was not selected by more participants. Question 13 asked participants to respond to more probing questions regarding friend and family support and provided insight into participants overall ranking of this variable. For example, participants were asked to rank their agreement with the following statement “I have favorable family conditions to support my efforts to pursue the degree in the online learning environment.” Participants were asked to rank their agreement with this statement using a Likert scale rating from 1 to 7, with 1 being strongly disagree and 7 being strongly agree. In response to this question, 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed and 15% of participants chose neutral or just above neutral and 15% strongly disagreed or were slightly below neutral. Perhaps even more telling was that 14% of participants agreed or strongly agreed and 17% were neutral regarding the question if their significant other was annoyed with the amount of time they spent studying. Not having the support of a significant other is an external factor that is at odds with academic persistence and online students are more at risk of drop out without family support (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1989).
In addition to the external variable of significant other support is the variable of childcare demands. As mentioned earlier, the family status of the participants varied but 48% of the participants had children under the age of 18. With respect to childcare and household obligations, 27% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that those duties were distracting to their studies and 13% were neutral on the topic. Having the support of family and friends to assist with childcare is crucial for an online student’s ability to engage and persist in the academic program. As an example, Lucy, one of the participants who participated in the qualitative interviews, is a divorced mother of two and works the night shift as an ICU nurse on the COVID ward. When asked about her family and how she manages to fit schoolwork into her routine, she replied:

“What I tell people generally is, you know, the days that I work, I mean, I work. The nice thing is now my daughter’s is in kindergarten. I’m divorced, but he’s involved and he’s very supportive. And we actually have a great relationship. So that’s been wonderful. My work week, I go to work at 8pm. So generally, I take them to their dads like at seven, I go to work, I come home, I go to bed and then I pick them up from school. And so, um, you know, and then we do soccer or dance, those things. So, I get to spend some time with my kids. And then they go back to their dads, I go to work, but then after my seven workdays, I have 14 days off and it takes me usually until Wednesday, I get off on Monday morning, so usually by Wednesday I’m pretty good.”

Even though Lucy stated she had support, her work schedule and childcare responsibilities seem to demand a great deal of her time and she admitted that she is often behind in her schoolwork. Lucy’s comments are emblematic of the demands that working students with children must
manage and provides valuable insight into why students with such pressing external variables may be vulnerable to dropout.

**Financial Support**

Although the majority of students at New Law School are working adults, which is reflective of the general online student demographic, those students are still very concerned about financial assistance. In fact, financial support was ranked second behind faculty support with respect to factors that students viewed as impacting their persistence. Seventy one percent of participants indicated that financial aid was an extremely to moderately important factor in their persistence in the program. Table 2 provides details of participants’ perceptions of faculty support and financial assistance by school status—probation and non-probation.

Students on probation indicated financial assistance as having the strongest influence on persistence. Probation students are students who may have been academically dismissed or withdrew due to personal reasons and returned to New Law School. Although the survey did not allow for further explanation on this response, prior research suggests that finances are a significant factor in student dropout and even if a student is performing well academically financial stress is a significant persistence risk (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

In this study, an analysis of the responses of participants who were returning students indicated that 75% of those students felt that financial aid was an extremely or very important factor in their ability to persist as opposed to only 46% of non-returning students who felt that financial aid was a very important factor. Bean and Metzner (1985) assert that commuter students [distance students] are employed and are more likely to have financial responsibilities than residential students which may cause conflict between time and school priorities. Similarly, it can be asserted that since most online graduate students are working professionals they also
may have heavier financial burdens than a brick and mortar graduate student, which may impact their persistence factors.

Tom, a participant in the second phase of the study, commented in his interview that one of the reasons he chose to attend New Law School online was because of the financial support from his employer. “The company that I’m working with now as a contractor, they have a program where they will reimburse educational expenses up to $12,000 a year. I told them, okay get the paperwork ready; I’m finding a Law Program. The only night school program local to me shut down in May. So, I started looking and found this program and haven’t looked back.”

Although Tom did not expressly state so in his interview, he did mention that he was considering another type of program that was four times the cost of the law program than New Law School, and it was not financially feasible for him to attend. Thus, cost and financial support seemed to be a definite concern for this student.

Table 2
Probation and Non-Probation Students importance of financial aid and faculty support in the program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Non-Probation</th>
<th>Probation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N*</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Important</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Important</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
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<td>16</td>
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**Faculty Support**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely Important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderately Important</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly Important</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
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<td>8%</td>
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<td>9.1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing Data</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Reflects the number and percentage of participants selecting this variable for this question.

The survey did not allow for additional exploration of financial aid considerations. However, this is an area that warrants additional exploration, especially with respect to probation students who had a higher response rate for financial aid than other non-probation students. It is possible that issues related to finances may have impacted their prior withdrawal.

**Faculty Support**

Distance learners, perhaps out of necessity and geography, tend to be self-directed learners and, as such, tend to rely heavily on faculty support and interaction for guidance (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003; George, McEwen, & Tarr, 2020). Unfortunately, there may be a mismatch between the expectations of the student and the offerings of faculty (Rovai, 2003). Many students are most familiar with traditional brick and mortar instruction, which usually consists of more faculty involvement; thus, the expectation is that instruction will be similar to that of brick and mortar instruction. The degree of direct instruction differs by institution, but at New Law School, students are not required to attend the live seminars, which are held every other week. Students are expected to follow the online syllabus and module schedule to complete assignments and quizzes. Although faculty are available for meetings upon request, student and faculty interaction does not occur daily or even weekly.
Furthermore, the responsibility is primarily on the student to initiate faculty interaction. It is possible that the 74% of participants who ranked faculty support as an extremely to a moderately important factor in their ability to persist are not fully aware that the onus is on them to initiate contact with faculty. This mode of self-directed instruction perhaps fits the learning characteristics of many students. Indeed, the survey indicated that 24% of participants indicated that faculty support was slightly important or not important at all to their persistence. However, as Table 2 presents, both probation and non-probation students suggest that faculty support is an important factor to their persistence, even more than peer support.

Rovai’s (2003) study of persistence factors for online learners suggests that self-directed learning is situational and that it is not always the best approach for all adults, and perhaps there are times where it should not be used at all. Moreover, as Bawa (2016) indicated, online students may only reach out to faculty to get help with a specific problem instead of getting guidance on their learning, which is non-conducive to retention. Melissa, who is a full time professional and has attended another online professional degree program, participated in the second phase of the study and commented on faculty interaction with the following:

“What has been the biggest struggle for me is the transition between seminars, reading the material in the textbooks, and being able to bring in understanding to life without more frequent interaction with the instructors. So, the seminars are very spread out, they are like every other week, which is fine from a scheduling perspective, but it doesn’t help me at all when it comes to learning the material. So, I find myself having to find other resources. So, I have hired a tutor. I have joined study groups; I am online looking for other lectures that I can find. So, I’ve not had a good experience with that. So, I end up just doing a lot of extra time looking for other resources. So that’s been the biggest
struggle for me. It could be if there were more options to increase the frequency of seminars that that would help. Um, and I don’t know for certain that it has to be seminars, rather than more school offered opportunities to get the subject matter explained in more practical terms.”

In speaking with Melissa, her frustration with the lack of faculty interaction was apparent. However, having been a student in another online program she was able to draw comparisons between this program and the others. When asked about the difference between the other two online graduate programs in which she attended she stated:

“At the other program we did not meet with our professors. You had your homework; they gave you feedback. Everything was in writing. And so, you never met the professor. You never saw them. Not at all. All this classroom stuff [referring to New Law School’s live seminars], none of that existed for us, the six years that I was completing those two degrees. None of that at all. So, this was very, very, very different.”

Overall, Melissa thought that faculty were accessible, consistent with the 80% of participants who reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that faculty members were readily accessible to them. This finding would indicate that faculty in the New Law School program are doing a fair to a good job of assisting students if they reach out to them. However, there remains 20% of participants who either reported having no assessment of faculty availability or did not consider faculty to be accessible. While this may be a small number of students, it can significantly impact a school's attrition rate and will likely impact students’ incentive to further engage in the program.
Advisor Support

Closely related to faculty support is advisor support, which entails students having a designated person to reach out to regarding questions related to course selection, program policies and guidelines, and general encouragement during the program. The quantitative portion of the study assessed students perceptions of the institution’s advisor support, which has been shown to be an important factor in student persistence (Rovai, 2002; George et.al., 2021). Advisor support in an online environment differs from a brick and mortar institution not only because advisors are not physically accessible but also because students tend to not rely on administrative support as much as they do faculty support (George et al., 2021). However, that does not mean that online students do not need or want support services, such as advisor support (Rovai, 2002).

In response to perceptions regarding advisor support, 80% of the participants in this study reported that advisor support was moderately to extremely important to their persistence in the program. Forty-nine percent of participants reported having positive or extremely positive experiences with their advisor; however, 31% responded with negative or extremely negative ratings with respect to access to advisor support. With respect to the frequency of interaction with an advisor, 47% of participants responded positively or extremely positive regarding their level of satisfaction with the frequency of interactions with an advisor.

In addition to the frequency of interaction with advisors, students were also asked to assess how helpful advisors were with logistical issues such as school policies, course registration, and academic support. Most participants (54%) indicated that the quality of their interactions with advisors were positive or extremely positive; however, 37% were neutral or had a negative experience. One participant stated the following with respect to advisor interaction,
"[S]tudent advisor? Do I have one? The procedural aspects of this process were disastrous. My "advisor" went AWOL." Although this is only one participant's account of their experience with advising and not representative of the majority of participants' experiences, it is still troubling that some students have not received the type of advisor support needed to assist them with navigating the academic program. This student further noted that had it not been for another administrator whom he found through his own persistence; he would have left the program.

**Overall Institutional Support and Engagement**

Encompassed within an institution are the variables of faculty support and advisor support, and both impact students' overall perception of institutional support and engagement. These variables may have more of an influence on students' desire to engage with other peers than other external factors (Bawa, 2016). However, they are interrelated with other factors such as satisfaction with the program, faculty engagement, advisor support, and collaboration with classmates. Together they all impact academic and social integration in the institution and indirectly impact peer engagement and persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003).

The variables of faculty support, advisor support, and peer engagement are all connected to program satisfaction. Program satisfaction has been defined as interest and intellectual stimulation in coursework (Bean & Metzer, 1985) and the degree to which the program's policies and procedures are clear and consistent to the student (Rovai, 2003). Program satisfaction was included as a variable in the survey and other sub-variables that were closely related, such as program interest, challenging coursework, guidance on program policies and procedures, and assistance with technology. While these variables are not predictive of retention or engagement, they influence persistence and engagement (Rovai, 2003).
Table 3 provides an analysis of students' perception of institutional engagement and looks at the correlation between all participants' perceived satisfaction with the program and their level of interaction with faculty, perception of academic rigor, advisor support, and technology assistance. Sixty-two (1=missing) responses were reported regarding students perceived level of program satisfaction (M=5.72, SD=1.68), their perception of faculty engagement (M=5.93, SD=1.45), their perception of the difficulty of online law school classes (M=4.34, SD=1.60), their satisfaction with advisor support (M=5.54, SD=1.54) and their satisfaction with technological support (M=5.10, SD=1.51).

A Pearson’s ($r$) data analysis was conducted and revealed that students who agreed that the program was meeting their expectations had a moderate correlation of satisfaction with faculty engagement ($r = .51$). There was a weak correlation between student satisfaction of the program and their perception of the academic rigor of the online coursework ($r = .005$), perhaps indicating that for this cohort of students, program satisfaction is not closely related to the academic rigor of online courses. Data analysis also revealed a weak correlation between advisor support and program satisfaction ($r = .234$) and a moderate correlation between program satisfaction and technological support ($r = .476$).

### Table 3

**Program Satisfaction and Institutional Engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Program satisfaction</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Faculty engagement</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>.515**</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Challenging academics</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>4.34</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>-.097</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Advisor support</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.014</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 presents data that suggests program satisfaction has a moderate impact on how students perceive faculty intervention, and a great deal of student satisfaction is related to faculty engagement. As mentioned previously, the initiation of faculty engagement primarily resides with the student in most online programs, including New Law School. Bawa (2016) posited that online courses allow for less student-teacher interaction, and learners only communicate with instructors when they need help. Thus, this student-initiated paradigm may explain why some students do not feel that faculty are engaging enough or provide enough support and may lead to decreased persistence in online programs (Bawa, 2016). It should also be noted that because students are responsible for initiating outreach with faculty, that task may be impacted by other external factors, such as work demands. For example, when the researcher asked peer-group participant Melissa if she tried to reach out to faculty with any questions and concerns, her response was:

“I had one [professor] that has been very responsive, and we talked from time to time. The unfortunate thing is just like this meeting, [referring to the meeting with the researcher], a lot of times, his office hours are during my workday, and it's hard for me to get away. So, what I'll end up doing is sending an email, and sometimes that works depends upon the person. I guess the mood they're in that day or whatever the case may be.”

Even with this communication structure, it was surprising that 70% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that faculty were easily accessible through phone or email. In addition to faculty...
being accessible, 62% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that faculty provided prompt feedback when needed. One participant commented:

“I will say, you know, every time, every phone call that I've made or, you know each time I sent an email and asked, are you available so that we could talk about this or that and every single one has been incredibly accessible. Professor X has been like my substantive professor. He's offered, here's my office number, here's my cell phone number, call me.”

Again, this data is very encouraging and supports the responses that most participants gave regarding faculty accessibility. However, participants were more divided with respect to faculty giving regular feedback, with 56% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that faculty gave regular feedback and 44% of the responses ranging from neutral to strongly disagree.

**Creating a Sense of Community**

The section on institutional engagement also measured participants’ experiences with fellow students using a 7-point scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree. The questions in this section asked students to rate their experiences with other students in the area of collaboration and having a sense of community. The majority of participants (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that their fellow students helped to create a supportive learning environment and 65% agreed or strongly agreed that the online learning environment provided favorable conditions for creating learning communities. Thus, the results suggest that students feel a sense of community in the online setting and support the finding that 70% of the participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that they felt lonely in the classroom.

Although the sample sizes are different for the group of students that participated in the peer study sessions compared to those that did not, a one-way ANOVA analysis was used to
compare participants who participated in the peer study groups with those that did not and assess if there was a different perception of fellow student support and sense of community.

**Table 4**
*Peer Group and Non-Peer Group Participant Responses to Fellow Student Support*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Peer Group</th>
<th>Non Peer-Group</th>
<th>F (1,57)</th>
<th>η²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feelings of Isolation Virtual Classroom</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>.249</td>
<td>.620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online allows Creating Learning Communities</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.946</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students-create Supportive learning Environment</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>3.03</td>
<td>.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I experienced sense of Community in online Program</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.713</td>
<td>.402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peer group-N=8  
Non-Peer group N=50

As reflected in Table 4, there were only slight differences in the mean scores between the two groups, and the differences were not statistically significant as determined by the one-way ANOVA for most of the variables. The only area close to having a statistically significant difference was feelings about fellow students creating a supportive environment (F (1,56) = 3.032, p = .087). However, a p-value of .087 is still greater than a .05 alpha level, so any true statistical significance cannot be asserted.

**Impact of Self-Motivation on Persistence and Peer Engagement**
The survey participant who expressed frustration with the lack of advisor support also shared in his comments a critical aspect related to persistence, self-motivation. Self-motivation and the belief that one can succeed as just as important, if not more so, than other factors related to persistence and engagement (Bawa, 2016). Section five of the survey asked participants to assess their motivation level with respect to their learning and being able to take the lead in their learning. For example, using a Likert scale of 1 to 7, with one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree, participants were asked to rate the following statement "I feel responsible for my own learning." Not surprisingly, 90% of the participants responded that they strongly agreed with this statement. Students overwhelming rated themselves on the higher end in this section, and most participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were motivated to complete their online degree, that they were responsible for their learning, that they have the self-discipline to study online, and that they have a strong sense of self-efficacy. Many of those characteristics are typical of an online learner who tends to be more self-driven (Bawa, 2016), and that may also influence why online learners tend to be less concerned about peer engagement (George et al., 2021).

In reviewing the responses related to self-motivation, it is notable that forty-nine participants responded that they strongly agreed that they were self-motivated to pursue an online degree. It is possible that such a high degree of self-motivation influences students’ desire to seek help from peers, which may explain why only ten participants responded that they felt extremely comfortable collaborating with other classmates on course assignments. Although 54% of participants felt comfortable or extremely comfortable collaborating with other peers, 46% did not have the same comfort level, and the responses were more varied with respect to collaborating with peers. In analyzing if there was a difference in responses between peer-group
participants' and non-peer group participants' responses to self-motivation and collaborating with peers, there did not appear to be a significant difference. Both non-peer group participants and peer-group participants indicated that they strongly agreed that they were self-motivated learners, and proportionally, their responses were the same with respect to collaborating with peers.

Peer group participants interviewed in phase two of the study had the following comments regarding self-motivation and the relationship to peer collaboration. For example, Tom shared the following:

“The same attitude that got me through the military, I’m going to do this. And those are the types of students that I’m interested in affiliating with, are the same people that I believe are displaying that same, like I’m not here to try out law school. I’m actually here to attend law school. I know that sounds incredibly mercenary.”

Tom, like other participants, valued peer relationships as long as they furthered his academic goals. Similarly, when asked about interactions with other peers, Melissa stated:

“I’ll be honest with you; I don’t spend a lot of time cultivating that relationship [referring to studying with another student] as much because she’s behind and I don’t want to get caught up in in all of that. So, I’m cordial, we laugh when a joke is told. But other than that, I’m not getting on the phone because I don’t want to find myself sitting on the phone, getting more frustrated. I want to be with other people who are either ahead of where I am, or really get the concepts so that I can benefit from being in their presence.”

Both Tom's and Melissa's comments reflect the research that suggests online graduate students are not seeking peer relationships for socialization, and if they do engage with peers, it is to further their academic goals (Bawa, 2016). Some students, however, may not seek peer
engagement for an educational benefit; rather, they may desire the emotional support derived from peer engagement. For example, peer group participant Lucy stated:

“Personally, I don’t know that I need a big network, but you know, it’s been helpful just to have even my classmate, you know just to text her and know that there’s someone out there who’s going through the same thing, who’s probably feeling or who can actually tell you, Yeah, I feel the same way.”

The interview comments from these participants support the finding in the quantitative survey, that most participants had a strong sense of self-motivation and did not perceive peer collaboration as being very important to their success in the program, as indicated by their low ranking of their comfort level engaging with fellow peers. Nevertheless, the comments collected during the interviews also indicate that while peer engagement may not be highly desired, it is desired on some level by students.

**Impact of Peer support Groups on Engagement and Persistence**

As indicated earlier, eight participants actively engaged in the peer support groups. The demographics of that group included two women, five men and one unknown. Three participants were between 36-45 years of age, three were between 46-54 and one was over the age of 55. Five participants were working full-time, one was part-time, and one was unemployed. Seven participants were enrolled in the four-year Juris Doctorate program and one was enrolled in the three-year Executive Juris Doctorate program, which requires less credits and does not lead to state licensure. One participant was a returning student and was on academic probation and the other seven participants were in their first-year of the program. All but one of the participants were taking 7-12 credits this year, which is considered a full load for a part-time program.
Not surprisingly, participants in this group considered fellow student support necessary to their persistence in the program. All eight participants indicated that fellow student support was moderately to extremely important to their persistence in the program. As mentioned earlier, peer group participants' rating of experiences with fellow students and their sense of community was not statistically different from that of non-peer group participants. However, in taking a closer look at this group's responses to questions involving peer engagement, five participants strongly disagreed that they felt lonely in the online environment, and three were neutral on the topic. With respect to how fellow students helped create a supportive learning environment, the participants were neutral on the topic or agreed to strongly agreed.

Although eight participants indicated that they participated in the peer study groups, only one participant completed the quantitative section of the survey related to their experience in the peer group. Thus, an analysis of the impact of peer group participation on institutional engagement and peer engagement is not possible. The one participant who did complete the survey questions related to the impact of peer support groups strongly agreed that participation in the peer study group helped academically, helped improve study skills, helped with non-academic matters, and helped meet other classmates.

**Qualitative Analysis of Peer Group Participants**

Although most peer-group participants did not complete the quantitative section of the survey related to peer groups, they did share their comments regarding the peer study groups in the qualitative open-ended section of the survey. The researcher employed the following steps in analyzing the qualitative data collected in the quantitative survey. First, the researcher read through the responses and recorded emerging themes; second, coded the data by labeling the themes; third, connected related themes and collated related data. The themes that emerged from
the analysis were: Increased peer interaction, Academic assistance/Improved study skills; Collaboration with peers; Emotional Support; Increased confidence; and Program improvements. Below are the comments organized by theme in response to the questions, What is the best aspect about the student lead study groups?, What was the most important outcome that you gained from the student lead study sessions?, and What suggestions do you have to improve the peer groups?

**Increased Peer Interaction**

Many students commented that the benefits of the peer study groups allowed them to meet students that they would not ordinarily meet as illustrated by the following comments:

“They have recently been in the seat that we are in and can identify with our frustration better”,

“It’s a great opportunity to interact with other students and to work through topics you may struggle with in class.” Tinto (2017) asserts that social support arises from shared social activities and that support is important to persistence. Online environments that foster and encourage peer interaction allow students to know that they are not alone and creates a shared learning experience and community, thereby improving student persistence.

**Academic Assistance/Improved Study Skills**

As indicated earlier, peer group participants seemed to value the peer groups because it helped them achieve their academic goals. Similar to the participants in the study conducted by Terras et al. (2018), connection with peers was driven by the academic benefits received and not socialization. While socialization and emotional support were other benefits, they were not the motivation for joining. In response to the question, What was the most important outcome gained from the peer study group?, One participant gave the following comment, “I now love contracts”, “It made the concepts come together in my head.” Another participant stated, “the
material was broken down to be more easily understood.” Another peer group participant stated, “I learned the importance of issue spotting an organization. It was very informative; I really learned a lot during those sessions.” The comments shared by the participants in this study indicate the development of critical thinking skills, which is nurtured with peer to peer tutoring.

Madland and Richards (2016) explored the benefits of a "study buddy" peer model in an online program and posited that students who engage in student-to-student learning are doing the developmental activities required of critical thinkers, and that type of learning leads to student achievement. In that study, participants reported that engaging with another peer helped them improve their reasoning regarding course concepts (Madland & Richards, 2016). Studying with a peer allowed for collegial exchange and debate that is not typically found with student-teacher interaction. Similarly, as suggested by the comments of the peer group participants in this study, peer groups are a space where students can engage in deep learning and critical thinking at a pace that is usually not available in the classroom or a student-instructor exchange.

**Emotional Support and Increased Confidence**

Participation in peer groups provides students with support beyond academics. Emotional support is related to the sense of belonging. Tinto (2017) posits that students who perceive themselves as belonging are more likely to persist because it leads to increased motivation and a willingness to engage others in ways that further persistence. Participants indicated that peer group leaders could identify with their frustration better and were supportive of them. One participant commented, "they are very motivational; they give me hope that I can do this. My peer leader really talked me off the ledge."

The participant’s comment that the group leader “talked her off the edge” suggest that the peer groups provided her with emotional support and gave her the confidence needed to persist
and not give up on her academic goals. Rovai (2003) asserts that positive self-esteem is fostered through student-to-student interactions where students can receive feedback on the mastery of their academic objectives. The participant’s comments are similar to those of a participant in the peer support study conducted by Hortmanshof and Conrad (2003), which provided qualitative data of postgraduate students in a peer support program. Members of the peer group commented that participation in the group made them feel as if their individual experiences were not 'bizarre,' and it got them excited about learning, and learning how different students approached concepts was extremely helpful to their understanding (Conrad, 2003). Although there were not many students who participated in the peer groups, the outcomes for those that did suggest that the peer groups provided them with the support and confidence needed to succeed in their first year of the program.

**Program Improvements**

As mentioned earlier, only eight of the sixty-two participants indicated that they participated in the peer study group. The low attendance may be attributed to several factors, but peer group participants provided insightful comments that may have contributed to the low attendance. For example, participants commented, "offer easier access to the Zoom links to listen to recorded sessions," or "offer a weekly theme or schedule." Having a predictable and structured collaborative workspace is essential to encouraging online collaboration (Bawa, 2016). Although the peer study groups are student-initiated and student-led, the groups must be structured with learning objectives and goals in place and provide stability so that group members can work productively and value the time spent within the groups (Bawa, 2016).
Summary

Overall, the survey results indicate that participants' perceptions of what is important with respect to persistence are consistent with the research. Faculty support, family support, and institutional support are important factors that contribute to students having a positive online academic experience and contributing to their online community engagement. Kember's model of dropout from distance education (1989) includes a component of cost/benefit analysis which involves students deciding whether the opportunity costs of time spent studying are worthwhile given the perceived benefits of other activities. Students who decided to engage in the peer study groups have engaged in a cost-benefit analysis and have decided that the educational benefits derived from this activity outweigh other activities at the time of their participation. This is not to say that their perception of the other variables was deemed less important; it is clear from the findings that is not the case; instead, the qualitative data suggest that the benefits derived from the peer support groups are worthwhile to those that attend. This also suggests that if there were an increase in participation, more students would experience peer groups' academic and social support.
Chapter 5

Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods explanatory sequential study was to examine the impact of peer support on persistence of first-year online law students. In the first phase of the study, the quantitative research question addressed the central question, How does peer engagement influence student persistence in an online law school program? This question encompasses several variables which were included in the twenty-seven question survey. The survey data was collected via Qualtrics web-based survey. Phase two of the study consisted of individual interviews and focused on the question, How has your experience with peers in the program impacted persistence in the online law school program? In phase two of the study participants were randomly selected based on their response to questions 14 and 15 in the survey, which asked about their engagement in peer study groups and how many groups had they attended. Three participants agreed to participate in a follow up interview, which provided further context to their quantitative survey responses. In addition to the data collected from the individual interviews, the quantitative survey also asked participants to responded to open-ended questions related to peer support and institutional factors, which provided additional qualitative data.

The overall findings from the first phase of the study suggest that there is a moderate relationship between institutional factors such as faculty support, advisor support, and fellow peer engagement with engagement in peer support groups. However, the quantitative findings did not show a relationship between program persistence and engagement in peer support groups. The qualitative interviews with survey participants provided additional data, which support the
assertion that peer support groups positively impacts retention in an online law school program. Although the sample size of the participants that participated in the peer study groups was small, the results add to the scarcity of research related to student persistence in online graduate programs, particularly law schools. Moreover, the qualitative findings support the assertion that more research is needed regarding the impact of peer support groups on student persistence in online programs.

The quantitative survey and qualitative interviews addressed the following research questions:

1) How does peer support influence student persistence and engagement in an online law program?

2) Which of these external factors, if any, influence peer engagement in an online law program: career demands, family demands, age status?

3) Which of these intrinsic factors, if any, influence peer engagement in an online law program: self-motivation and skills competency?

4) How have the experiences of a peer support group influenced student persistence in an online law program?

The study's theoretical framework was grounded in Tinto's model of student engagement (1975) and Astin's model of student involvement (1984), both of which are foundational theories of student development. While both theories are still relevant, they are primarily based on traditional undergraduate brick and mortar students and are not an adequate lens to frame a discussion regarding online adult graduate students. Thus, this study is also viewed through the thematic lens of student development models that focus on distance students and, specifically, older online students. For instance, Kember's model of dropout from distance education (1989),
Rovai's composite persistence model (2003), and Redmond et al.'s online engagement framework for higher education (2018) all provide current research on the nuances of student persistence in online learning environments. The data results within the context of persistence variables such as family and work demands, institutional support, self-motivation, academic integration, peer engagement, and peer support will be discussed relative to those theoretical frameworks.

**Extrinsic Factors Impact on Persistence and Engagement**

Many extrinsic factors impact online students' motivation to engage and persist in their program; some are external to the academic program, such as family and friend support and work obligations (Kember, 1989). Other influential external factors are related to the academic program, such as faculty support, advisor support, technology, and a sense of community (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Rovai & Whiting, 2005). Astin (1984) asserts that educators must realize that they are competing for a share of a student's life; this is particularly true for older online students balancing work, family, friends, and other activities. Online institutions must acknowledge that a student's investment in external activities directly correlates to a reduction in time and energy that a student has for academics. Thus, resources should be devoted to helping students learn how to integrate those activities and responsibilities with their academics (Kember, 1989).

**Family and Friend Support**

The first substantive question of the quantitative survey asked participants to identify factors most important to their persistence in the online law program. High importance was placed on family and friend support, with 56% of participants indicating that family and friend support was extremely important and 19% indicating that it was moderately important. This result is consistent with Bean and Metzner's (1985) attrition model, which emphasizes the
importance of external factors on student persistence and asserts that students with poor friend and family support or more likely to drop out. Although 56% of the participants indicated that family and friend support was of high importance, it was not the highest-ranked factor related to persistence. Question 13 provided a closer probe related to family and friend support by asking participants to rank how strongly they agreed with statements related to family, friend, and work support. Participants were asked to rank how favorable their family conditions were in supporting their pursuit of a degree online. With respect to this question, 68% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that family conditions were favorable, 15% of the respondents were neutral or just above neutral, and 15% of the participants strongly disagreed or were slightly below neutral. Perhaps even more telling was that 14% of participants agreed or strongly agreed, and 17% were neutral with the question if their spouse or significant other was annoyed with the amount of time they spent studying.

Kember (1989) states that family support is an external factor that is essential to student persistence and the absence of such support puts students at a higher risk of dropout. Furthermore, Kember (1989) describes family support not just as a factor in a student's persistence but as a significant factor in a student's academic integration. It is not enough for a family member to allow a student to return to school, but the degree to which a significant other sees value in the student's degree correlates to how likely that family member will support the student when studying (Kember, 1989). Moreover, if a significant other does not see value in the degree and the student's study time takes priority over family time, the student may have difficulty integrating academic and social responsibilities (Kember, 1989). Kember’s (1989) perspective provides useful context to the finding that 31% of participants agreed that their significant other was annoyed with the amount of time spent studying. Thus, if administrators
want to impact engagement and persistence with online students, then a student's family support, or lack thereof, must be taken into account throughout a student's academic program. Students, faculty, and advisors need to be mindful of the changes that occur within the student's family and make adjustments accordingly.

**Institutional Support**

Students need to feel connected to the school that they are attending. Rovai (2003) asserts that students should not feel as if they are outsiders, and this need is related to having a sense of community or, as Tinto (1993) refers to it, as an institutional commitment. Tinto (1975) and Astin (1984) both place a high degree of importance on institutional support, which encompasses faculty engagement, advisor support and fostering of peer collaboration. Rovai (2003) emphasizes the importance that institutions must place on students' first-year experiences. Students must know that they are entering a supportive community upon entry, that there are resources to help them should they need them, and opportunities to connect with other peers (Rovai, 2003).

According to Rovai (2003), a successful program, which equates to more students persisting, consists of active participation with faculty and administration willing to listen and offer assistance with personal and financial problems. Thus, it is not surprising that participants in this study rated faculty and advisor support as two of the most important factors related to their persistence in the program. Although the participants in this study were law school students, their desire for connection and support from faculty and advisors is not unlike that of other graduate students. For example, Terras et al. (2018) studied online graduate students in a teaching program and investigated their perceptions of engagement with faculty, advisors, and peers. In that study, participants overwhelmingly indicated a desire to connect with faculty and
advisors more than with peers (Terras et al., 2018). The results of this study and previous research are not dismissing the need or desire for peer engagement. Instead, it is asserting that adult online students seem to place more of a value on the relationships and guidance provided by faculty and advisors.

**Faculty Support**

Analysis of the quantitative data found that 74% of the participants ranked faculty support as extremely to moderately important to their ability to persist. This number is somewhat surprising considering that many students that choose to study online do so because they view themselves as independent learners and are not typically seeking the interactions found in traditional brick and mortar schools (Bawa, 2016). Nevertheless, the survey results suggest that most students want to be socially engaged, at least with respect to academics. Redmond et al. (2018) define social engagement as students intentionally building relationships with faculty, leading to a sense of belonging within a learning community. Those relationships can be formed within the virtual classroom or in other forums, such as discussion boards or emails with faculty.

Whatever the forum, engagement with faculty is an essential factor in persistence, but many students miss the opportunity to engage because the student usually initiates faculty-student interaction. Due to the independent nature of online learners, students do not reach out to faculty except for specific problems, and as a result, they miss the chance to establish a rapport and strengthen their learning community (Bawa, 2016). One of the participants in the study commented that she reaches out to faculty when she needs help, but sometimes she cannot meet because her work schedule interferes with school. Work demands aside, this student illustrates the pattern of many students. Unfortunately, student-teacher communication usually occurs when there is a specific problem, and student engagement is adversely impacted as a result.
Advisor Support

Related to faculty interaction is advisor support and its importance to engagement and persistence. Advisors are designated persons assigned to each student and are responsible for reaching out or being available to ask questions regarding course selection, program policies, and general encouragement during the program. Advisors are essential components to institutional support because online learners may not know how to navigate the policies and procedures of an online program, and not having a sound advising system can be detrimental to student persistence (Rovai, 2003).

Considering that online students are characteristically older and perhaps deemed to require less assistance, it is somewhat surprising that 80% of participants in the study indicated that advisor support was moderately to extremely important to their persistence in the program. Unfortunately, while most participants indicated that advisor support was important to them, almost half of the participants were either neutral or reported having negative experiences with advisor support. One participant commented that he did not have an advisor, more accurately his advisor did not engage with him, and if it were not for the assistance of another administrator, he would have dropped out of the program.

In addition to negative feedback on the amount of contact with advisors, 30% of the participants also indicated negative experiences with the quality of interaction with advisors. The advisors at New Law School are typically generalists and are trained to advise on administrative functions such as withdrawals, registration, and other administrative tasks. However, some students, particularly law school students, may need an advisor that can offer guidance specific to their academic discipline. For example, one participant commented, "I have partnered with a professor who is advising me. It is not an advisor-I do not have one." Every student at New Law
School is appointed an advisor; however, this participant felt that the appointed advisor was not meeting their academic needs, and he was able to find mentorship with a professor. Rovai (2003) states that online institutions need to be consistent and precise in their programs, policies, and procedures, including making students aware of the roles of advisors and offering detailed program and course information. New Law School, as with other online programs, provides policy information to students. However, what is lacking from the advisor’s perspective is direct practice experience. I am not suggesting that online programs only have skilled advisors in a particular practice area, but it may be helpful to have some advisors on staff who have intimate knowledge of the academic program to provide guidance beyond administrative functions.

**Intrinsic Factors Impact on Persistence and Engagement**

Persistence and engagement are impacted by extrinsic and intrinsic factors, which are also dependent upon each other. Extrinsic factors such as family and institutional support are viewed as more surface-level influencers on persistence, but intrinsic factors have more impact on persistence and engagement (Kember, 1989). Both are essential elements to student persistence, but a student can be encouraged by family and rewarded by their academic program (e.g., with high grades); however, if the student does not feel internally motivated or interested in the academic program, then they will not persist. In short, if the student does not derive any personal benefit from the program, it is unlikely that they will engage with others in the program or persist to completion.

**Goal Commitment**

Kember (1989) defines goal commitment as encompassing both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Intrinsic motivation is having an interest in learning for learning’s sake, and extrinsic motivation is linked to the student’s commitment to achieving a tangible qualification.
The value that a student places on a particular outcome and the degree of their interest relates to their level of involvement (Astin, 1984). If a student's academic interest aligns with their career needs, then intrinsic motivation is heightened and seems to have a more significant link with goal commitment (Kember, 1989). This tenet was exemplified by the comment of a peer group participant, who remarked that he attends the peer groups for the following reason, "it's one of those things that's going to help me learn the material. This is an additional tool that if I don't use that tool, I'm an idiot. It's a tool to help me get through this." This participant, Tom, described himself as mercenary and willing to do whatever it takes to make it through the program. When asked why he wanted to come to law school, he replied that he was always curious about the cases that he worked on within his industry. He always wanted to know more about the legal aspects of those cases. For him, it was not necessarily career advancement but personal growth. His motivation was primarily intrinsic, which was the catalyst for him being involved in the study groups.

Tom's engagement and attitude are representative of the concept of "behavioral engagement" found in Redmond et al.'s (2018) online engagement framework. Behavioral engagement includes asking questions, contributing to discussions, active participation in academic activities, and participation in extracurricular or non-academic activities within the institution. Students who engage in these learning behaviors develop academic skills that contribute to successful learning outcomes (Redmond et al., 2018). Astin (1984) also links goal commitment to motivation and, similar to Redmon et al. (2018), asserts that motivation is not merely what a person thinks or feels but also how she behaves that defines and identifies involvement.
Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is a key factor in persistence and is defined as one's personal belief in their ability to succeed in a specific situation or a specific task (Tinto, 2017). The attainment of one's goals is dependent on how strongly one believes one can achieve those goals. Thus, having a sense of self-efficacy is particularly important for adult learners who may have a history of academic failure and or may have been removed from school for several years (Knowles, 1980). Participants in this study overwhelmingly indicated that they strongly agreed with the statement that they had a strong sense of self-efficacy, which aligns with the high ranking of self-motivation in the quantitative survey. Self-efficacy may also be manifested in how motivated students are to seek out help from faculty and administrators and collaborate with peers. Perhaps online students who have a high degree of self-efficacy also have more of an individualistic approach to their studies which does not align with peer group involvement. Moreover, since the participants in this study were first-year students, they may not see the value of peer group participation unless they need academic help. Unfortunately, the point at which many students realize that they need academic help may be too late to prevent academic probation.

Participants who indicated that they participated in the peer study groups also seemed highly motivated to succeed and viewed engagement with faculty and peers as necessary to achieve their academic goals. Although participants indicated a high degree of self-efficacy on the quantitative survey, that same level of assuredness was not felt when a participant was asked to explain his answer. For example, when a second phase participant was asked what some of the barriers that prevented him from participating fully in class were, he responded that self-doubt was the biggest issue. Although this participant attended the study groups, he believed that self-
doubt would prevent him from progressing. When asked how he handles his self-doubt, he responded:

"I lock it back in the closet where it belongs... It's just one of those things that everybody deals with over time—you kind of get used to it. You do the best with what you have at the time, and you ignore that self-doubt. You just continue to move ahead."

This participant was highly motivated and believed that his engagement with other peers in the study group helped his lack of confidence. In his opinion, the study groups helped him address self-doubt because they helped him learn the material, which boosted his confidence. Another participant in the peer study group stated that she reaches out to professors when she needs help and plans to reach out to another student she feels would be a good study partner. These participants' comments reflect the research that suggests that older online students are not motivated to engage with others purely for the sake of socialization, but they tend to engage when it fits within their academic goals (Bawa, 2016, George et al., 2021). Thus, if online administrators want to increase student participation in peer groups, the messaging should focus more on goal achievement rather than socialization.

**Sense of Belonging**

Fostering a sense of belonging involves two crucial factors: institutional support and students' motivation to engage with the institution and peers. As discussed earlier, faculty and advisor support is critical to having students feel like they belong and that the school is committed to their success. In addition, to self-efficacy, a sense of belonging in a community is also essential to persistence (Tinto, 2017; Strayhorn, 2018). A feeling of belonging can be viewed in the larger sense as having an affinity for one's institution and more specifically to having a connection to a group of people within the university, department, or field of
specialization (Strayhorn, 2018). Smaller and more personal connections are more directly related to students' motivation to persist within the university (Tinto, 2017). Having a sense of belonging increases students' motivation and engagement in the academic community (Tinto, 1975).

Students in an online environment need to be purposeful and intentional about creating an environment in which they feel connected. Unlike in a brick and mortar institution where fellowship can occur organically, online students need to be more proactive. Redmond et al.'s (2018) online framework include collaborative engagement, which involves students developing connections with peers and faculty. It requires the student to contribute to creating their own supportive environment proactively. This is not to say that the academic institution is not responsible for fostering an environment conducive to collaboration, but students need to be active participants. The majority of participants in this study (51%) agreed or strongly agreed that their fellow students helped create supportive learning environments and 65% agreed or strongly agreed that the online learning environment provided favorable conditions for creating learning communities. Despite being online, 70% of participants also indicated that they did not feel isolated in the online classroom. A possible explanation is that the online classrooms allow students to communicate via chat, and many classes are also live video seminars so that students can interact with each other. Another interpretation of this data is that online students are by nature independent learners and come to this environment with a specific goal and will engage with others only to the extent that socialization serves their personal goal. Perhaps both are true; students can interact in class, which may be enough engagement for most students, and the effort to engage with peers outside of class may not seem necessary or beneficial.

**Peer Support Impact on Persistence and Engagement**
It is widely accepted that peer support is an essential factor in undergraduate students' persistence (Tinto, 1974; Astin, 1983). Peer support is equally important to online graduate students' persistence (Bunn, 2004; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Fedynich et al., 2015). However, peer programs are more commonly accepted in undergraduate programs than graduate, particularly online graduate programs (Hortsmanshof & Conrad, 2003; Cherney et al., 2018). Although the results of this study indicate that most students at New Law School do not use or see the value in peer-group support, the research on undergraduate and graduate peer groups suggest that peer support is a beneficial resource. As suggested by the comments from the peer group participants, participation in the peer groups provided them with academic support and emotional support that is helpful in their persistence in the program.

As mentioned previously, the demographic of online graduate students tend to be older and have longer lapses between academic programs and having a peer could significantly ease the transition into the online program (De Smet et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the majority of students that participated in the peer support groups did not complete the quantitative portion of the survey related to their perceptions of peer support influence on persistence; however, the comments of one of the participants provide valuable context to this variable. In response to the question of how has peer-group impacted her persistence, Melissa commented:

“It's motivational. They [the study group leaders] give me hope that I can do this. The study leader did that for me the other night. He really talked me off the ledge. Just realizing that everybody struggles their first-year. Most everybody. And at some point, you're going to get past this, the concepts are going to click, you just continue to stay in and keep doing what you're doing. And that's really important to hear because it's very
easy to get overwhelmed by everything else going on, and to say this is too much. I'm out of here.”

Melissa's involvement in the peer groups and her positive experience within the group supports Tinto's (1975) position on social integration.

Tinto's (1975) dropout theory posits that social integration includes participating in support groups and having that friendship support is directly related to persistence in college. Although Tinto's (1975) research was focused on traditional undergraduate students, the principles of engagement are applicable in an online environment, although the manner in which students engage is different. Although the manner in which students socialize is virtual, the principle still applies. Students who engage in activities with peers benefit from academic and social rewards that increase the person's commitment to the institution and thereby increase the probability that the student will persist (Tinto, 1975). The quantitative data collected in this study appear at odds with the peer support research, notably since only 8 out of 62 participants attended the peer study groups. However, the comments collected from peer group participants all support the findings of previous research. Based on the comments, it is arguable that the quantitative results of the study would have yielded more positive findings if more participants had attended the peer study groups.

**Connection with Peers**

As noted in the previous chapter, there were no statistical differences between peer group participants' and non-peer group participants' perceptions of the importance of learning communities and peer collaboration. The majority of participants (51%) responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that their fellow students helped create supportive learning environments and 65% agreed or strongly agreed that the online learning environment provided
favorable conditions for creating learning communities. Section seven of the survey contained additional questions for peer group participants to answer regarding collaboration within the study groups; however, only one peer group participant completed that section. Thus, it is not possible to draw any interpretations from that portion of the survey. Although there were no statistically different perceptions between the peer study participants and the non-peer study participants, an important distinction is that peer group participants took the action steps required to collaborate with peers that both Redmon et al. (2018) and Tinto (1975) consider important elements to academic persistence and online student engagement.

While the majority of participants agreed that their fellow students created a supportive learning environment, 46% of participants indicated that they were not comfortable collaborating with others on academic matters, which may indicate that they do not see the value of engaging with peers and the impact on persisting in the program. This lack of desire to connect with other peers was also found in a study conducted by Terras et al. (2018) involving online graduate students in an education program. In that study, participants wanted engagement with advisors and faculty, but there was not the same desire to connect with peers (Terras et al., 2018). Furthermore, the connection that students wanted with other peers was more for learning purposes rather than socialization (Terras et al., 2018). The finding in Terras et al. (2018) is very similar to the findings in this study of online law students. It would be reasonable to attribute the low desire for peer connection to the inherently independent nature of law school and law school students. However, the results in Terras et al. (2018) suggest that this phenomenon is not unique to law school but is a sentiment shared by other graduate students.

The findings of this study are also consistent with previous research that suggests online graduate students are motivated to engage with peers to the extent that it advances their academic
and career goals (Bawa, 2016; Terras et al., 2018). Online students, particularly graduate students, are not seeking socialization when they enter an online program; rather, establishing relationships is more purposeful. For example, one participant commented, "I want to be with other people who are either ahead of where I am, or really get the concepts so that I can benefit from their presence. There is a young lady who really seems to understand [referring to the class material], and I've been thinking about reaching out to her." This is not to say that online graduate students do not value socialization with peers. However, students at this stage of their academic and professional career have chosen to enter an academic program for a particular purpose and appear to value connections that further that purpose over those that do not. Online graduate students have competing external and internal factors that impact their ability and motivation to engage with other peers, and extracurricular activities, such as peer groups, need to be explicitly related to a tangible outcome if institutions want students to be involved (Astin, 1984; Bawa, 2016; Tinto, 2017).

There is a saying, "you do not know what you do not know." That sentiment may apply to the participants in this study and graduate students in general. As stated previously, many online graduate students do not participate or see the value in connecting with peers (Bawa, 2016; Terras et al., 2018). There could be several reasons that explain this phenomenon, perhaps work and family demands prevent them from engaging with peers, or perhaps it is self-doubt or lack of connection to the institution. However, what this study and others (Terras et al., 2018; Hortsmanshof & Conrad, 2003) suggest is that when students do participate, they realize the value in peer engagement and realize how peer support does positively contribute to their persistence in their program. Thus, online graduate school administrators should improve their
early outreach to students and make them aware of peer groups' existence and the benefits of joining the groups.

**Limitations in Methodology**

The study was limited by the convenience sampling of the participants and lack of a true experimental design. However, it was not possible to conduct that type of study because all first-year students at New Law School are invited to participate in the first-year peer study group. Participation in the study groups is strictly voluntary, and there is no way to control the number of participants in the groups. The study is also limited because of the varying times in which students begin their academic program. The start of the study groups and the start of the semester were different and did not allow for a pre-test and post-test to be administered to participants in the groups. The administration of a pre-test and a post-test would have provided additional detail on the impact of the peer groups on participants' academics and perhaps allowed participants additional time to cultivate peer relationships that may have impacted their responses to the quantitative and qualitative portion of the study.

**Limitations in Analysis**

While the study had a robust sample size for the quantitative portion of the study, the sample size for the qualitative portion of the study was limited, which impacted the type of analysis that could be run on the data. Due to the disparate sample sizes of peer group participants and non-peer group participants, it was not possible to run correlational analysis between the groups. The sample size of the groups, particularly the size of the peer group participants, required that the analysis be limited to descriptive statistics. A larger peer group participant cohort would have allowed for more meaningful analysis amongst and between cohorts, thereby increasing the validity of the study's conclusions.
Limitations in Generalizability of the Results

Again, the sample size of the peer group participants limits the extent to which the conclusions can be extended to other populations. Although the sample size of the peer group participants was small, the sample size in the overall study was significant, and thus the conclusions drawn could potentially be generalizable to other online graduate programs with similar demographics. Furthermore, while there may be significant similarities with New Law School’s population to other online graduate programs, there may be program differences that limit the generalizability of the conclusions to other online graduate programs, and comparisons should be made with caution.

Recommendations for Future Research and Online Peer Models

As more students take advantage of online graduate programs, there needs to be more research on the persistence of online graduate students. As noted earlier, most research in this area still relies upon theories based on traditional undergraduate programs, such as Tinto (1975) or Astin (1984). While these theories are foundational, they are not particularly instructive with respect to adult online students. Also, there needs to be increased research on the need for institutions to invest greater resources in online support services (Bailey & Brown, 2016; Cherney et al., 2018). Notwithstanding the academic setting, academic and non-academic support is important in the interest of "ensuring success, promoting persistence, and avoiding dropout" (Bailey & Brown, 2016, p. 460. While prior research and this study support that online students consider faculty and advisor support to be a more significant factor with their persistence, peer support has still been shown to positively influence those students who participate. However, it seems that students need to be encouraged early and often to engage with peers; otherwise, likely, they will not utilize peer support. As stated earlier, online students
tend to be more independent learners, and the benefits of engaging with peers may not be immediately evident. However, lack of engagement with peers can negatively impact learning (Cherney et al., 2018). Therefore, online student support administrators need to encourage peer relationships and foster peer engagement proactively and intentionally.

Prior research and current model practices indicate peer engagement is possible and practical, but it takes careful planning and implementation (Bailey & Brown, 2016). Subsequent research needs to be done on the impact of online administrators taking an active role in the organization and implementing peer support programs and assessing the impact on student persistence. Additionally, future studies should include exploration of different peer support models and how they can be implemented in online settings. Below are examples of online peer support models and suggestions for enhancing administrative student support services to improve peer engagement amongst online graduate students.

**Reframing of Peer group Engagement**

The peer group participants in this study had similar feedback regarding peer engagement. Primarily, they indicated that they would engage if it benefited them academically and furthered their academic goals. In short, they will socialize with a purpose. As one peer group participant stated, "I wasn't there to play around." It is incumbent upon online higher education administrators to rethink how to promote peer engagement in an online setting. One suggestion would be for higher education institutions to invest resources into a dedicated staff person for peer engagement. The responsibilities for such a role may include the following:

1. Reaching out to first-year students soon after their enrollment and making them aware of available student resources, including the peer study group.
2) Working with upper-class peer mentors to create accessible times and viewing platforms for peer meetings.

3) Meeting with upper-class peer mentors to monitor group progress and assist students with difficulties within the group.

4) Meeting with first-year students who have been identified as academically at risk or who have several external demands (e.g., family and work) and encourage them to participate in the peer groups as a source of academic and peer support.

This list is not exhaustive, but it is a good starting point for online graduate administrators to raise the value and impart the benefits of peer engagement amongst first-year peer students. As stated before, a possible explanation for students not participating in the peer groups was because they either were not aware of the resource or because they did not realize the benefits of participating. Having a dedicated program administrator would alleviate that problem.

Peer Support Models

In addition to having a dedicated administrator responsible for peer engagement, online graduate programs also need to consider the structure of the peer support models. As mentioned in chapter one of this study, the definition of peer mentoring is inconsistent, and there are several models of peer mentoring that are implemented in higher education programs (Lowery et al., 2018). Lowery and her colleagues (2018) provided a literature review of peer mentoring programs in graduate programs, which can serve as valuable templates to structuring a peer mentoring program for an online program. It should be noted that the programs reviewed were from various academic disciplines, and all were programs implemented in a face to face or hybrid settings. Every research study of the different models found a positive learning and social impact gained from the peer support program. The overview of these peer support models
provided by Lowery et al. (2018) suggests that peer mentoring, regardless of the academic discipline, positively impacts persistence. Also, the findings propose that different forms of peer support have varying levels of impact on student achievement and satisfaction (Lowery et al., 2018). Thus, organizers of peer mentoring groups must be mindful of their demographic and be intentional in the type of program developed; this is particularly true for online programs.

For example, Lehan et al. (2018) reviewed a peer support model that provided support to graduate students via an online learning center staffed by paid academic coaches. The academic coaches are provided at no cost to students, and students can meet with coaches up to two times a week. The focus of the meeting with the coach is content-specific as opposed to general study skills. The researchers found no statistical difference between learning center participants and non-participants with respect to retention. However, there was a significant difference in course performance, with learning center participants outperforming non-participants. There were several limitations noted in that study, one of the more notable limitations was the lack of attention given to foundational study skills, such as time management, critical analysis skills, and course organization. These skills are essential for online students, many of whom may have been away from school for several years and may lack foundational academic skills. Thus, if a program were to implement a learning center model, general study skills should be a mandatory area reviewed by academic coaches. For online law students, skills such as course organization (outlining), case comprehension and dissection (case briefing), and issue spotting are foundational areas that first-year law students must know and should be included in a learning center model as well. However, most online adult students could benefit from assistance in creating a study schedule that works with their life, creating a study plan, and learning how to self-assess their work.
Utilizing upper-class students as peer tutors seems to be the most common peer support model found in academic programs because it allows successful students to share and teach entering students skills that are effective (Lowery et al., 2018). The concept of online peer support was pioneered by Mercy College in 2000 with the creation of the "Course Wizards" (Sax, 2003). The duties of the "course wizards" were more like that of a teaching assistant. Their duties included tutoring students, facilitating discussion, providing valuable resources, but their most important role was serving as a role model of a successful student (Sax, 2003). The tutors work with the professors, but their role is more active and independent of the professor and the classroom. As online tutors, the "wizards" are particularly helpful because they provide technological assistance with academic and social support (Sax, 2003). Students who participated in the courses that were assigned "wizards" reported feeling more comfortable in class, and an end of semester survey found that those students were more than two and a half as likely to ask for help than those students in classes without "wizards" (Sax, 2003).

The "course wizards" program was implemented in an online undergraduate setting. Despite being in an undergraduate setting, the characteristics of the undergraduate online learner are similar to that of an online graduate student. They tend to be more independent learners and do not readily ask for help, even if it is to their detriment.

Having worked in several law schools, this researcher has firsthand experience of law students not wanting to ask for help out of fear of appearing like a failure. This researcher developed a similar upper-class tutoring program at a brick-and-mortar law school to address that barrier and provide students with a peer resource to feel comfortable asking for help. Although the researcher developed the program in a traditional brick and mortar setting, tutors and first-year students had the discretion to meet when and where they wanted. Similar to the
results found by Sax (2003) with the "Course Wizard" program, students in the law school setting also were grateful that they had someone to reach out to ask questions, no matter how simple, and to provide guidance on general law school students. As one of the peer group participants stated, "I really like to have that sounding board and talking to other people that are experiencing the same issues and finding how they work through things." The upper-class peer tutoring model can be effective even in online settings. If an institution wants to use this model, they must encourage the upper-class mentors to be flexible with their meeting times to accommodate online graduate students who are working full time and have families. Mentors should also work closely with a course faculty member and an administrator to remain abreast of course material and alert faculty when students do not understand important concepts or if a particular student is struggling. Finally, the program administrator should be responsible for vetting and providing training to upper-class mentors to ensure that mentors have the appropriate temperament to handle different personality types and can work well independently.

Pairing students with another same-year peer is a model that may initially seem to be an unlikely model for online students, but it has proven effective in a brick and mortar program and could potentially be transferrable to an online setting. Thalluri et al. (2014) examined the buddy model implemented in a nursing program in Australia. In this program, students who entered with known risk factors (i.e., lower academic indicators and came from historically marginalized groups) were paired with stronger students in their cohort. The idea behind this model is that students who are at risk are paired with academically stronger students in the same cohort who can then assist them with the course material and provide peer support. Also, in pairing the same cohort peers, the hope is that the mentoring experience would be more relaxed for the at-risk
student because their tutor would be of a similar age and at a similar stage of study (Thalluri et al., 2014).

There is merit to pairing students with similarly situated peers; however, that model may prove problematic in an online setting. A significant concern with such a model is a potential stigma that an at-risk student may experience when paired with a peer that has higher entering academic criteria. A program administrator would need to be very intentional in addressing this issue and ensuring that the tutor has been trained in working with students from diverse backgrounds and trained on providing support to a student in a substantive area that they too are learning. The assumption cannot be made that simply because a person has a record of academic honors that they are necessarily an expert on study skills and know-how to impart that knowledge to another student. Also, if an online program were to employ this model, every effort should be made to pair students in the same geographic region. As mentioned before, time is limited for online students, and having to navigate a tutoring schedule with a tutor in a different time zone could be a deterrent to engagement.

Peer groups at New Law School are structured using upper-class peers who volunteer to host weekly sessions open to all first-year students. There are no size caps placed on the groups and typically very little structure with respect to the theme of the groups. Based on the models of other online peer groups, it is suggested that an administrator take a more active role in promoting the benefits of the peer groups through classroom announcements, live webinars, or personal meetings. Furthermore, the size of the groups should be limited to five to seven students. Cherney et al. (2018) suggest that a group of five is the optimal size for a group as it allows students to contribute and learn from others’ contributions.
Moreover, students tend to contribute more when engaged with a smaller group. Since the New Law School peer groups are voluntary, it is recommended that group leaders implement a registration policy to ensure that they have an optimal group size. To accommodate students who cannot make the group, the group leaders should consider recording the sessions so that other students can view them later. To ensure privacy, the recordings should be password protected and limited to New Law School students.

Another strategy that could be implemented is reciprocal peer questioning, an active engagement tool advanced by Johnson (2006). Reciprocal peer questioning requires group members to share a content-specific question and then take turns asking and answering each other’s questions. This type of engagement facilitates a higher level of topic analysis, encourages comparison and critique of other viewpoints and requires more than a surface group involvement. Research by Curtis & Lawson (2001) has found that the more interested a student is in a group topic, the more motivated the student is in participating in the collaborative effort. Furthermore, having students submit questions on topics in which they are interested creates a group where members are more interested and creates a dynamic where members are willing to share and create knowledge (Brindley et al., 2009).

**Cultural Considerations**

Although not a focus of this study, cultural considerations must be addressed given that almost 60% of the students at New Law School identify with a non-white ethnic group. Bawa (2016) asserts that nuances of cross-cultural communication, coupled with technological impediments, can create untenable learning environments, leading to attrition. The peer buddy model examined by Thalluri et al.(2014) in the Australian nursing program was created primarily to address the high attrition of the Aboriginal people in the nursing program. Online graduate
programs need to be just as innovative in thinking about ways to support and help students of color persist, either with peer support groups or other institutional support.

In addition to institutional support, there is a particular need for increased research of diverse students in online settings. Almost 50% of students in online programs are students of color (NCES, 2016), yet there is a significant lack of research that includes the perspectives of students of color in online settings (Du et al., 2016; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017). Du et al. (2016) challenge the narrative of a one-size-fits-all paradigm regarding student motivation and persistence. Yes, some commonalities exist amongst all students, but what is needed in this area of research is an intentional inclusion of students of color and their perceptions regarding online learning and motivation and persistence (Du et al., 2016). Similarly, Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2017) also acknowledges the need for an increase in empirical studies examining issues related to culturally diverse students and collaborative learning in the online environment.

**Financial Aid Considerations**

Finally, the impact that financial aid has on persistence is an area that was ranked extremely important or very important for participants who either were enrolling for the second time or were on probation. Although the survey did not allow for a more in-depth analysis of this area, this is a topic that warrants an additional review. Financial responsibility is a significant factor in online student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1975). This area may limit a student's ability to perform well academically and fully commit to being a member of the online academic community (Kember, 1989). Adult online students are constantly making cost/benefit analyses throughout their academic program, and there may be times where the costs outweigh the benefits. More thought and research should be given to students who have to withdraw from school because the financial burden is too high or the loss of earning opportunities is too high.
This study did not probe into why probation students dropped out or withdrew, but it is reasonable to make the connection that financial considerations could have played a factor. Notably, 75% of returning students, who were on probation, indicated that financial aid was an extremely or very important factor in their ability to persist in the program. Not only is this an area that warrants additional research, but it is also an issue that online advisors should be mindful of when advising students. Although money is not always the solution to financial concerns, it may help some students who have demonstrated need. Some possible recommendations are for online institutions to consider offering financial hardship assistance to students struggling to purchase books or pay for classroom fees or provide scholarship incentives for students who demonstrate academic growth during the year. There are several ways in which students with financial need can be assisted. However, the first step is for online graduate programs to recognize finances as a significant barrier to persistence and take steps to create solutions.

Summary

There is a relationship between silence and suffering, and students need an outlet to express their voices. Peer groups provide that forum. Student voices are the least heard in higher education research, and their voices are almost non-existent at the graduate level (Devenish et al., 2009). Although the quantitative results of this study did not indicate that participants saw the benefits of participating in peer groups, the qualitative interviews with peer group participants did support the assertion that peer groups are important to persistence and should be a central component in student support services. Peer groups can be a place where students can share their voices and their ideas in a safe and, hopefully, nonjudgmental space and know that they are not alone in their journey. This study sought to give voice to adult online graduate students, to hear
their concerns, and discuss the issues that impact their success. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, the hope is that this study will catalyze future quantitative and qualitative research on the persistence and attrition of online law students and other graduate students as a whole.

In addition to further research on peer support in online graduate programs, there is a need for more focused and intentional support services on the part of online graduate programs. For example, graduate programs need to be more intentional in creating spaces for peer engagement and devoting resources to make this a priority imitative. Intentionality translates into hiring a program coordinator who is responsible for student outreach and creating peer engagement spaces. It also includes being cognizant of the demographics of their students and developing opportunities for students to engage in meaningful activities that address diversity and encourage students from diverse backgrounds to interact and share ideas. Finally, intentionality means identifying the needs of our students, whether they be academic or personal, and strategizing ways to address those needs so that they do not become barriers to students being able to integrate their academic and personal commitments.

As mentioned earlier, this paper sought to examine the influence that peer support has on online students' persistence. The results indicated that there are significant barriers that impact their ability even to explore the benefits of peer support. However, the interviews of peer participants suggest that having peer support is helpful and does potentially influence persistence in an online program. Thus, one of the significant conclusions drawn from this study is that online students want peer support; perhaps, though, they just do not realize they want peer support. However, if given the space and encouragement to interact with their colleagues, they would learn the importance of support from peers. It is our responsibility as online administrators
to create those spaces so that students can realize they are not alone in this journey and discover that there is value in supporting each other.
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U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003-04, 2007-08, 2011-12, and 2015-16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04, NPSAS:08, NPSAS:12, and NPSAS:16). (This table was prepared May 2018.)


Appendix A

RECRUITMENT EMAIL TO ELIGIBLE STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Dear Student

During the past year you have been asked to participate in a survey from the Law School Student Engagement Organization. Another request for your participation might appear redundant, but I assure you the request being made by this letter is important. The information you provide likely will have far-reaching implications on what is made available via online legal education: the degree of support services sought and the kind(s) of advising provided to students.

We are conducting a study that will identify factors contributing to and/or impeding law students’ persistence in an online environment. This information is very important given a high dropout rate of students from distance education programs and the fact that increasing numbers of postsecondary institutions offer advanced-degree online programs. As a first-year student in an online graduate program, you have been selected as a possible participant in this study, as your input will help us understand what it is like to pursue a doctoral degree in an entirely online format.

The results of the study will help to further improve the quality of Juris Doctorate and Executive Juris Doctorate program at Concord Law school and better meet the needs of online graduate learners.

Please complete this web survey. It should take about fifteen minutes. It is not related to any prior survey requests you might have received and has been approved by the West Chester University Institutional Research Review Board and the Dean of Concord Law School. All responses to the survey will be treated as aggregate information so anonymity of respondents will be preserved. The survey is preceded by an informed consent form explaining the survey and pointing out participation is voluntary. The survey can be accessed through the following URL: https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3vBUDG6cldc3Osd

You will have to use a password to access the survey. The password is used to ensure that no one outside the sample has access to the survey. Your responses are completely confidential and cannot be tied to your password.

Your password is: concord

The survey will be available until November 15, 2020. We hope that you will elect to respond. At any point, either prior to or even during your responding process, it will be permissible to withdraw without ever having any adverse results.

Following the analysis of the survey results, four of you will be contacted for a telephone follow-up interview. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted at
the time most convenient for you. The interview will be recorded. The recordings will be only used for data collection and analysis. Your responses will be confidential. To protect confidentiality, you will be assigned fictitious name for use in description and reporting the results. All data, including the recordings will be kept in an encrypted password protected file and will be destroyed two years after the end of the study. Your name will not appear in any of the data, recordings or transcripts. In any publication based on the study, all potentially identifying information will be omitted or changed.

If you have any questions about the survey you will receive next week and/or the study details feel free to contact me at the number below, or the West Chester Institutional Research Review Board [610-436-3557].

Larasz Moody Dr. David Backer
Principal Investigator Secondary Investigator/ Committee Chair
484.202.0665 610-436-2326
Appendix B
Online Law Students Persistence-Peer Engagement Survey

Online Graduate Student Survey

Q1 In which program are you currently enrolled?
  ○ JD (1)
  ○ EJD (2)

Q2 Are you a returning student?
  ○ Yes (1)
  ○ No (2)

Q3 In what term did you begin your first year JD/EJD program at Concord Law School?
  ○ 2001 Winter Term (1)
  ○ 2002 Fall 1L Term 2 (2)
  ○ 2004 Spring 1L Term 1 (3)
  ○ 2007 Summer Term (4)
  ○ 2009 Fall 1L Term 1 (5)

Q4 What is your current status at Concord Law School?
  ○ Non Probation (1)
  ○ Probation (2)

Q5 How many credit hours have you completed at Concord Law School previously?
  ○ 0 (1)
  ○ 1-12 (2)
  ○ 13-24 (3)
  ○ more than 24 (4)
6 How many credits are you currently taking in this term?

- 0-3 (1)
- 3-6 (2)
- 7-12 (3)
- more than 12 (4)

Q7 What factors are important to you in your decision and ability to persist in the JD/EJD program?

- work schedule (1)
- family schedule (2)
- convenience (3)
- flexibility (4)
- cost (5) program quality (6)
- program offerings (7)
- program prestige (8)
- career advancement (9)
- online learning environment (10)
- learning style preference (11)
- adequate access to technology (12)
- Other Please Specify (13)
Q8 Please rate how important the following factors are in your ability to persist in the JD/EJD program?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Extremely important (1)</th>
<th>Very important (2)</th>
<th>Moderately important (3)</th>
<th>Slightly important (4)</th>
<th>Not at all important (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology Assistance (1)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advisor Support (2)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty Support (3)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial Aid (4)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library (5)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>Bookstore (6)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>Family and Friend Support (7)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>Employer Support (8)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fellow Student Support (9)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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Q9 What are your experiences thus far in the JD/EJD program? (Please use the scale below form one through seven, with "1" indicating your strongly agree with the statement and "7" indicating that you strongly disagree)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My expectations of the program are being met (1)</th>
<th>1 (1)</th>
<th>2 (2)</th>
<th>3 (3)</th>
<th>4 (4)</th>
<th>5 (5)</th>
<th>6 (6)</th>
<th>7 (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The program is useful and relevant to my career plans (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The program is tailored to my interests and needs (3)</td>
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<td>I would prefer if there was an in person component to the program (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academically, online courses are more challenging (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>My experience with online courses has been positive (6)</td>
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<td>I have developed good research and writing skills (7)</td>
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<td>I feel isolated in virtual classrooms (8)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An online learning environment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
provides favorable conditions for creating learning communities (9)

My fellow students have helped to create a supportive learning environment (10)

I experienced a sense of community in the program (11)

Instructors actively engaged me in class discussion (12)

Instructors are easily accessible through email and/or phone (13)

I received prompt feedback and help from instructors when I needed it (14)

Instructors give me regular feedback on the quality of my coursework (15)

The faculty in this program care about me
Q10 Please indicate how comfortable you are with the following components of the online learning environment. (Please use the scale below from one through seven, with "1" being very uncomfortable and "7" you are very uncomfortable).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>as an individual (16)</th>
<th>1 (1)</th>
<th>2 (2)</th>
<th>3 (3)</th>
<th>4 (4)</th>
<th>5 (5)</th>
<th>6 (6)</th>
<th>7 (7)</th>
<th>NA (8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I receive computer assistance and technology help when I need it. (17)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>I promptly received course materials (18)</td>
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<td>Course textbooks were easy to obtain (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td>The registration process was convenient, efficient and responsive (20)</td>
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<td>I have adequate access to Purdue University Global library services (21)</td>
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<td>The admission process into the program was easy (22)</td>
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<td>Learning in an online environment (1)</td>
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<td>My computer technical skills (2)</td>
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<td>Using course software (Bright space) (3)</td>
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<td>Academic workload associated with studying online (4)</td>
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<td>Participating in discussion boards (5)</td>
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<td>Participating in live seminar classes (6)</td>
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<td>Understanding course concepts through online interactions with classmates and instructors (7)</td>
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<td>Interacting with course professor (8)</td>
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<td>Learning effectively in an online environment as compared to a face to face classroom (9)</td>
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<td>Collaborating with classmates online for a course assignment (10)</td>
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</table>
Q11 How would you rate your experiences with your student advisor? (Please use the scale below from one through seven, with "1" indicating extremely negative and "7" indicating extremely positive).

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<th>1 (1)</th>
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<th>7 (7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accessibility to my student advisor (1)</td>
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<td>The amount of interactions with my student advisor (2)</td>
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<td>The quality of my interactions with my student advisor (3)</td>
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<td>Assistance with course registration (4)</td>
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<td>Understanding of course specific requirements (5)</td>
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<td>Ability to advise on JD/EJD program progression (6)</td>
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<td>Encouragement while in the program (7)</td>
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<td>Ability to help you understand academic rules and policies (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Informed you of academic support options (tutoring, writing help) (9)</td>
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</table>
Q12 How motivated are you to pursue a JD/EJD degree online. (Please use the scale below from one through seven, with "1" indicating you strongly disagree and "7" indicating you strongly agree)

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<th>1 (1)</th>
<th>2 (2)</th>
<th>3 (3)</th>
<th>4 (4)</th>
<th>5 (5)</th>
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<th>7 (7)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am motivated to pursue my degree online (1)</td>
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<td>I feel responsible for my own learning (2)</td>
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<td>I have a strong feeling of self-efficacy (3)</td>
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<td>I have developed self-discipline to study online (4)</td>
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<td>I can balance family and studies (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>I can balance job and studies (6)</td>
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<td>I can manage my study time well (7)</td>
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</table>
Q13
Please indicate how the following selected external factors have influenced your progress in the program. (Please use the scale below from one through five, with "1" indicating you strongly disagree and "7" indicating you strongly agree)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have favorable family conditions to support my efforts to pursue the degree in the online learning environment (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My &quot;spouse&quot; or &quot;significant other&quot; has become annoyed because I spend so much time studying (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>My duties around the house have distracted me from my studies (3)</td>
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<td>My friends encourage me in my study efforts (4)</td>
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<td>My employer has encouraged me to pursue my JD/EJD (5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>My job responsibilities make it difficult for me to continue with my studies in the program (6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>My work colleagues are supportive of me pursuing my JD/EJD (7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>My work schedule does not interfere with my studies in the program (8)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial issues are an obstacle to my studies in the program (9)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Q14 Are you currently participating or have you ever participated in the (SBA) student lead weekend study sessions?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q15 Please indicated the number of sessions in which you have attended

- 1-3 (1)
- 4-8 (2)
- 8+ (3)

Q16 The following statements related to peer engagement and the SBA Weekend Study group. If you participated in at least 4 or more study sessions, please rate your experience using
the following scale. (Please use the scale below from one through seven, with "1" indicating you strongly disagree and "7" indicating you strongly agree)
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<th>1 (1)</th>
<th>2 (2)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall participating in the study sessions enhanced my understanding of the course content (1)</td>
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<td>As a result of student lead study sessions I was able to engage better with the course content (2)</td>
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<td>I found that participating in the student study sessions made me more confident in taking quizzes and summative assessments (3)</td>
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<td>The student study sessions provided me with an opportunity to clarify my understanding of some of the difficult concepts (4)</td>
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<td>The student study sessions provided me the opportunity to direct my own learning (5)</td>
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<td>The student lead study sessions increased my interests in the covered subjects. (6)</td>
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<td>The student lead study sessions allowed me to synthesize my past and present knowledge (7)</td>
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<td>The student lead study sessions helped me to strengthen my learning skills (8)</td>
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<td>The student lead study group provided extra support with academic matter and non-academic matters (9)</td>
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<td>The student lead study group helped me to maintain a regular study routine. (10)</td>
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<td>The student lead study sessions allowed me an opportunity to interact with upper level peers (11)</td>
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My expectations of the student lead study sessions were fulfilled. (12)

The student lead study sessions enhanced my live seminar experience (13)

Attending the student lead study sessions was an effective way to learn in a non-threatening environment (14)

I would recommend the student lead study sessions to other students who have difficulty with course content (15)

The student lead study sessions made me feel more engaged with the law school community (16)

The student lead study sessions made me feel less isolated in an online learning environment (17)
The student lead study sessions had a positive impact on me continuing to the next term in my program (18)

The student lead study sessions is an important factor to me remaining in law school (19)

Q17 What would you state is the best thing about the student lead study sessions?
________________________________________________________________

Q18 What was the most important outcome that you gained from the student lead study session?
________________________________________________________________

Q19 What suggestions do you have that could improve the student lead study sessions?
________________________________________________________________
Q20 What is your age?

- Under 25 (1)
- 25-35 (2)
- 36-45 (3)
- 46-54 (4)
- over 55 (5)

Q21 Please indicate your gender

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- transgender (3)
- non binary (4)

Q22 What is your current employment status

- Full-time (1)
- Part-time (2)
- Unemployed (3)

Q23 Please indicate your state of residency

________________________________________________________________
Q24 Please indicate all the degrees you have earned (Circle all that apply)

☐ Associate's (1)
☐ Master's (2)
☐ Bachelor's (3)
☐ Doctorate (4)
☐ Other Professional degree, please specify (5)

Q25 Which best describes your current family structure?

☐ Married with children under 18 (1)
☐ Married with children over 18 (2)
☐ Single Parent family with children under 18 (3)
☐ Single Person, never married (4)
☐ Single Person, divorced or separated (5)
☐ Single Person, widowed (6)

Q26 What additional information can you provide about your experiences in Concord Law School JD or EJD program?
Q27 Would you be willing to participate in a brief follow up individual interview?  

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)
Appendix C

Peer Engagement and Persistence in an Online Graduate Program

Interview Protocol

Interview #:
Interviewee:
Date:
Time:
Length of Interview:

1. Please tell me about yourself.
   • Where do you work?
   • What is your education?
   • Tell me about your family.

2. Why did you choose to pursue an online JD or EJD program?
   • How did you learn about the program?
   • What other programs and institutions did you consider?
   • What was the biggest attraction for you to enroll in the online JD program?
   • What were any major surprises or disappointments, if any, about the program?
   • Why did you decide not to continue in the program (for “withdrawn” group)?

3. Tell about your experiences studying in the online asynchronous environment. How comfortable are you with:
   • taking classes in the online asynchronous environment?
   • interacting with instructors and students?
   • developing essay-like responses?
   • participating in online discussions?
   • reading and writing reactions to other students’ postings?
   • not seeing your classmates and the instructor?
   • not receiving non-verbal cues?

4. What relations have you established with your online classmates?
   • Has a learning community been established among the students with whom you are taking online courses? What kind of community is it?
   • What are your experiences with online learning community?
   • What kind of support and encouragement do/did get from such community? Please provide examples.

5. What is it about the program that made you pursue the degree?
   • What do you think of the program quality?
   • What do you think of the program offerings?
   • How does/did the program meet your needs?
• What are/were some supportive factors related to the program?
  • How much support do/did you receive with
    o assistance with technology problems?
    O online access to the library?
    O admissions to the JD/EJD program?
    O registration for courses?
    O paying the bills?
    O financial aid?
• What are/were some barriers to your persistence related to the program?

6. What is the role of the faculty in your efforts to pursue the JD/EJD degree online?
  • How do you typically interact with the faculty?
  • How much do you interact with the faculty over the course duration?
  • What kind of feedback do you receive from the faculty?
  • How open is the faculty to accommodate to your needs?
  • What advice do you receive from the faculty?

7. How motivated are you to pursue the JD/EJD degree online?
  • How do you balance your family, work, and studies?
  • What responsibility do you assign to yourself in your efforts to get your JD/EJD online?
  • What helps you stay motivated?
  • What things positively affected your desire to persist in the program?
  • What things negatively affected your desire to persist in the program?

8. What was your experience while participating in the student lead study groups?
  • Was the study groups the first time you interacted with other peers in a small group?
  • What made you join and continue attending the study groups?
  • How has the student lead study group affected your engagement with other parts of
    the law school community?
  • How has the student lead study groups affected your motivation to remain in the
    program?
  • Has your group leader provided advice in academic and non-academic issues?
  • How has the study groups affected your interactions with other online peers?
  • How has the study groups impacted your academic performance?

9. What else would you like to tell me about your persistence in the JD/EJD program
    that we have not talked about?

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Appendix D

Informed Consent Email

We are interested in understanding Peer Support and Persistence of Online Graduate Students. For this study, you will be presented with information relevant to the topic of persistence and peer support. Then, you will be asked to answer some questions about it. Your responses will be kept completely confidential.

The survey should take you around 15 minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any point during the study. The Principal Investigator of this study can be contacted at larasz.moodyvillarose@purdueglobal.edu

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge: Your participation in the study is voluntary. You are 18 years of age. You are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation at any time for any reason.

- I consent, begin the study
- I do not consent, I do not wish to participate
Appendix E
Follow up Interview Email

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a follow up interview for my study of students’ persistence in an online law school. This study will identify factors contributing to and/or impeding students’ persistence in an online learning environment and help understand what it is like to pursue a law school degree in a fully online environment. This is a mixed methods study, which involves two phases, survey and individual interviewing.

A few weeks ago, you were asked to complete the online graduate student survey as a part of this study. I appreciate your cooperation and want to let you know that I got interesting results. But the numbers won’t tell much besides that they are statistically significant. Now I need your insight to understand in more depth why certain factors have such an impact on law student’s persistence in distance education.

I am asking you to participate in an online video chat interview, which will last approximately 45 minutes and will be conducted at the time most convenient for you. I hope that you will choose to participate in the study as your input is very important. Below is a link for an informed consent to participate in this phase of the study and a sign up link for a day and time for the interview.

Informed Consent Link: https://wcupa.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_esA186JnUMBEixv

Sign up link:

https://doodle.com/poll/hir8u7a7at26b5f2?utm_source=poll&utm_medium=link
Thank you for your cooperation!

Larasz Moody
Principal Investigator
484.202.0665
Appendix F
IRB Approval

TO: Larasz Moody and David Backer
FROM: Nicole M. Cattano, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
DATE: 7/26/2020

Project Title: Peer Engagement and Student Persistence in an Online Graduate Program
Date of Approval: 7/26/2020

 Expedited Approval
This protocol has been approved under the new updated 45 CFR 46 common rule that went in to effect
January 21, 2019. As a result, this project will not require continuing review. Any revisions to this
protocol that are needed will require approval by the WCU IRB. Upon completion of the project, you
are expected to submit appropriate closure documentation. Please see
www.wcupa.edu/research/irb.aspx for more information.

Any adverse reaction by a research subject is to be reported immediately through the Office of Research and
Sponsored Programs via email at irb@wcupa.edu.

Signature:

Co-Chair of WCU IRB

WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155