

Chapter 13

For-Profit Online Learning: The Student Experience

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the author's experience as an online student at the master's and doctoral levels. This autoethnographic study discusses her experience with academic support, the curriculum and teaching methods, and how the author worked through her dissertation without meeting her mentor or committee members in person. The author also discusses how she overcame challenges, such as competing priorities and feeling isolated due to the lack of in-person contact. The chapter aims to provide a guideline for other online students that may help them through similar circumstances and provides recommendations for how academic administrators can adjust curriculum and resources to improve the student experience. Key factors related to the author's success were determined to be time management skills and the ability to be a self-directed learner. Recommendations include flexible program structures, assignment and grading rubric alignment, experiential learning project incorporation, and earlier interactions with potential mentors.

INTRODUCTION

I attended two brick-and-mortar universities to obtain an associate of arts in general studies and a bachelor of science degree in marketing. After high school, I found it easier to attend courses in person because I did not have a career, family, or financial responsibilities that were competing priorities. Nearly 10 years after graduating with a bachelor of science, I was dissatisfied with the direction of my career but had

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to continue working to maintain financial responsibilities. The decision to enroll at an online university was made based on the flexibility it provided to working adults. At the time, I did not perceive brick-and-mortar universities to offer flexible class schedules that would allow me to work and obtain my degree simultaneously. I also obtained a master of arts in human resource management, a post master's certification in college teaching, and a Ph.D. in management education at online universities. Throughout my online programs, I worked full-time as a human resource professional for six years and tutored undergraduate and MBA learners for three years. My tutoring experience included assisting learners at a for-profit online university in approximately 30 unique business courses through supplemental materials, the development of resources, and one-on-one live sessions.

As a former online student, I used an autoethnographic approach to reflect on my experience and provide context through analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Autoethnographic studies combine autobiographic and ethnographic elements and acknowledge a researcher's influence and subjectivity (Ellis et al., 2011). Therefore, an autoethnographic approach allowed me to describe my lived experiences as an online student while understanding that the experience may vary based on the circumstances of others. The remainder of this chapter will discuss my lived experience as I completed three online degree or certification programs. The discussion will highlight my experience with different members at the university, including staff, faculty, and my peers. I will also discuss the types of curriculum that I experienced and how I worked with a dissertation mentor and committee in a virtual environment. Before offering solutions and discussing future research, I will highlight the challenges I faced and what I did to overcome those challenges. This chapter aims to demonstrate the level of rigor and commitment required in an online program and to provide suggestions on enhancing the student experience.

BACKGROUND

Characteristics of an online learner differ from that of a traditional brick-and-mortar student. Personal responsibilities limit the ability for adult learners to attend a brick-and-mortar university, but online learning provides an opportunity for these learners to achieve their educational goals (Redmond et al., 2018). A key difference in these environments is that online universities offer limited or no face-to-face interaction between students and academic support teams. These academic support teams can help overcome the additional challenges online learners face by providing clarity, but they must offer multiple contact methods and prompt response times (Salvo et al., 2019). Students did not always perceive this support as beneficial. For example, Ellis et al. (2009) found that only 39% of students believed they had enough time to

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