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**TOMATOES FOR SALE:**

**AN EXAMINATION OF ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION DECISION MAKERS'**

**PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE OFFERINGS**

A Dissertation in

Higher Education

by

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## ABSTRACT

Online offerings provide increased student access and aid students in achieving their educational goals, while also promising higher education institutions access to new revenue streams. As demand for online offerings increase and institutions move to include online offerings in their long-term strategies, researchers have not documented how online offerings are being incorporated and for what purpose. Understanding how higher education decision makers view the purpose of online offerings and how perceptions vary throughout an institution can provide insight into the current state of online education and help inform attempts to change or improve it. This study, therefore, examines how decision makers in various roles within a higher education institution perceive the purpose and role of online offerings at their institution. Using case study methodology, this dissertation includes qualitative interviews with 12 participants employed at a large R1 university located in the northeastern United States that offers both residential and fully online programs. From the interviews, four overarching themes were identified, and findings suggest that participants perceive online offerings as more of a market-focused function designed to generate revenue to subsidize more mission-focused core activities of the university. Net revenue generation is integral to the purpose of online offerings and decisions are made to maximize net revenue by growing enrollments or by reducing expenditures. As such, online offerings are intentionally market focused and efforts to invest in enhancing quality or using online offerings to innovate are deterred.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

The higher education landscape is changing; as more college students enroll in online courses than ever before, higher education professionals are expanding online offerings to meet the increasing student demand. The claim that online education was a fad or that it could not compete with traditional, brick-and-mortar institutions has largely been debunked (Haynes, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018). In fact, institutions that have historically relied exclusively on residential students are increasingly offering online courses to grow enrollment, expand access, and generate revenue (Bailey et al., 2018). In a span of approximately 20 years, online higher education has emerged from the peripheries and into the mainstream of respectable higher education. These online programs leading to fully-accredited college degrees have drastically challenged traditional notions of what earning a college degree means and what it looks like (Xu & Xu, 2019). Since 2000, online higher education in the U.S. has increased in popularity to the extent that the majority of higher education administrators view participation within the online environment as a necessity for future institutional survival (Allen & Seaman, 2007, 2013; Seaman et al., 2018). After ten years of reporting on the status of online higher education, Allen and Seaman (2013) stated, “in 2002, less than one-half of all higher education institutions reported online education was critical to their long-term strategy. That number is now close to seventy percent” (p. 4). In 2002, one in ten college students enrolled in an online course (Seaman et al., 2018). By 2015, the population increased to one third of college students (Seaman et al., 2018), and by 2019, reporting shows that over half of college students enrolled in at least one online course (Hill, 2021). As demand for online offerings<sup>1</sup> increase and higher education

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this research, *online offerings* is used as a blanket term that encompasses a higher education institution’s online courses. Online offerings can also refer to a group or set of online courses that form a program of study that leads to a degree, certificate, certification, or badge.

institutions move to include online offerings in their institutions' long-term strategy, researchers have not yet documented how online offerings are being incorporated into institutional strategy and for what purpose. As key decision makers responsible for managing online offerings regularly make decisions that shape the online experience, understanding who these decision makers are and how they perceive online offerings is vital in accounting for the impact that online offerings have on the larger higher education landscape.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The recent drastic increase in demand for online programs presents an interesting quandary for higher education decision makers intent on leveraging online offerings to grow enrollment. Although online offerings provide increased student access and aid students in achieving their educational goals, both of which align strongly with institutional mission and values, it also promises access to new revenue streams. While revenue is a requirement for any college or university, pursuing endeavors primarily for financial return is unbecoming for any non-profit institution, especially when these efforts are so closely associated with the core functions of the institution, such as instruction and course offerings (A. Kezar, 2008; Zemsky et al., 2005). Identifying and understanding how higher education decision makers view the purpose of online offerings and how perceptions vary by professional role can provide insight into the current state of online education and may inform attempts to change or improve it.

One approach to understanding perceptions of online education is to consider a spectrum spanning from a mission focus to that of a market focus. Clark Kerr, former president of the University of California and head of the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, compared the tension within higher education to that between the sacred Greek acropolis and the agora (Kerr, 1988). The acropolis, built high upon a hill, stood for society's commitment to beliefs,

ethics, and mission. Conversely, the agora, or marketplace, was “led by ungodly commercial interests and scheming public officials and venal academic leaders...” (Kerr, 1988). Universities often find themselves somewhere on the hillside between the two, striving to balance the need to respond to markets while remaining committed to mission.

Similarly, Gordon Winston’s (1999) analogy comparing the university to both a church and to a car dealership is equally compelling. Universities are like churches in that they believe strongly in their purpose and mission and endeavor to increase student access and provide financial aid to disadvantaged students. However, universities are simultaneously like car dealerships that recruit the best students with merit-based aid while providing the same education at full cost to other students (Winston, 1999). A university’s ability to function within the market while simultaneously pursuing its educational mission speaks to the complexities of higher education institutions.

Universities are multifaceted organizations, “essentially part church and part car dealer, devoted partly to charity and partly to commerce,” which when faced with finite resources, creates tension between the two (Winston, 1999, p. 31). However, determining what university functions fall under what role is much less clear. To understand the role of any one activity, namely online offerings, it is helpful to observe the individuals who make decisions that shape and influence the activity at the institution. However, utilizing individuals’ perceptions and decision making to understand the role of online offerings is largely under researched and the resulting impacts to online education are not fully understood.

### **Context and Background**

While online education has existed for years, its early utilization was dominated by for-profit institutions with less-than-stellar reputations (Carey, 2019; Winston, 1999). More recently,

online higher education ascended from association with for-profit institutions and entered relationships with more renowned, regionally-accredited schools and even into the nation's most prestigious institutions. These new relationships provide millions of students with educational opportunities formerly out of reach via traditional residential instruction. Many institutions that were previously concerned with online offerings' association with for-profit institutions and poor academic rigor (Hara & Kling, 1999; Morey, 2004; Soley, 1998) now champion online course formats as an avenue toward helping new student populations obtain their educational goals (Deal III, 2002; Giannini, 2020; Laws, 2021).

However, one of the largest selling points for higher education institutions interested in online offerings is the potential increase in revenues. Over a five-year span, the revenues in the online industry were predicted to climb from \$550 million in 1998 to \$11.4 billion in 2003 (P. Singh & Pan, 2004). During a time when many state governments were cutting higher education budgets and institutional leaders were facing decisions to increase tuition rates, online education appeared as a sound alternative (Ortagus & Yang, 2018). Today, online education is a rapidly-growing market valued around \$250 billion and projected to increase to \$1 trillion by 2027 (Nagel, 2021). Institutions that provide online offerings not only collect the tuition dollars of students who attend online, but also greatly increase their prospective student pool by removing the constraints of having to enroll residentially.

In stark contrast to efforts that seek to capitalize on online offerings' revenue potential, several colleges and universities have leveraged the online space to offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in attempts to provide educational material to the masses. While certainly falling under the umbrella of online education, MOOCs are unique in that they do not award credits or degrees to students and no tuition is charged (Allen et al., 2015). Although MOOCs

initially received immense media attention, and 2012 was even dubbed “the year of the MOOC” (Pappano, 2012), they ultimately failed as a replacement for more traditional methods of higher education and have become much less popular over the last decade (Soukaina et al., 2020).

While MOOCs have certainly challenged traditional norms of higher education, their decreasing popularity, absence of a culminating certified credential, and lack of revenue potential, excludes MOOCs from the interests of this study.

Recent events concerning the outbreak and response to COVID-19 have further highlighted the importance of understanding decision makers’ perceptions of online education. In 2020, as colleges and universities shut the doors to their physical classrooms, the doors to a virtual college experience flew open. As higher education personnel were heavily involved in this transition, their perceptions of what online learning is and the role that it plays for the future success and sustainability of the institution is likely observable in their decisions that shape the online education experience. As higher education institutions plan for future semesters amidst the uncertainties of COVID-19, their dependence and utilization of online offerings will be paramount to their schools’ success.

However, how institutions use online offerings to successfully achieve the schools’ mission is more complicated. Colleges and universities with online offerings span an array of different institutional types, each with a distinct focus, mission, and purpose. Even within a single institution, the purpose of online education is likely perceived differently by colleges, departments, programs, and individuals. A college administrator’s understanding of the purpose of online education would likely contrast with that of a faculty member’s, a graduate student’s, or a prospective student’s perspective. While perceptions vary among stakeholders, decisions that impact the online experience and the future of online education occur regularly.



The idea that higher education institutions exist on a spectrum creates a useful framework for understanding the perceived purpose of online education. One end of the spectrum adheres to the humanitarian and democratic ideal of providing education to the masses. Similar to Kerr's (1988) acropolis and Winston's (1999) church analogy, this end contains notions of educational equity and increasing educational access regardless of geographic location and socio-economic status. Here, the internet is viewed as the great access equalizer. Institutions which were previously selective now utilize online offerings to diversify student populations. Enrollments are not limited by classroom size and consequently filled out of necessity by students who can afford the cost to attend. The online experience is potentially as legitimate as in-person instruction and decision makers act accordingly to reach this potential.

The other end of the spectrum is a much more cynical and calculated perspective of the purpose of online education, closely resembling Kerr's (1988) agora and Winston's (1999) car dealership. The underlying motif is that online education exists to generate revenue. This perspective evolved out of the questionable marketing tactics of many online for-profit institutions that emerged and flourished throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Still, toward this end of the spectrum remain reputable institutions, unquestionably focused on growing enrollments, cutting costs, and generating new revenues. For many of these institutions, online enrollments subsidize other, more legitimate operations, like niche residential programs, graduate assistantships, and research endeavors (Zemsky et al., 2005, p. 58). Decisions to improve online offerings and the online experience are intrinsically linked with increasing online enrollments and subsequent revenues.

Rarely is an institution so easily placed at the far ends of the spectrum. Most institutions have much more complex perspectives on the purpose of online education. Zemsky et al., (2005)

detail these complexities by discussing the tension that exists between a university's core and its peripheries. The core represents functions that typically align with the university's mission and closely resemble Kerr's (1988) acropolis and Winston's (1999) church, such as instruction, research, student life, and athletics. However, the peripheries, or "perimeters" are the actions that tend to be market-driven, like the launching of a business school, nursing program, and other professional degrees in response to increased student demand (Zemsky et al., 2005, p. 55). Since online offerings have the capacity to increase student access and enrollment in programs closer to the university's core, while still generating much-desired revenue, one could argue that online offerings exist both as a core function and a function of the perimeter. While the notion that online offerings can serve multiple purposes is a probable reality, one likely serves as the primary purpose over the other. The distinction between primary and secondary purposes may be observable when difficult decisions regarding online offerings are made. Decision makers will likely act in accordance with their perception of online education's primary purpose, which is often to the detriment of the secondary purpose; a proposition I intend to explore with this research.

### ***Legitimacy***

While there are undoubtedly countless variables contributing to online higher education's ascent that also influence its perceived purpose within the higher education landscape, a legitimacy theory perspective is particularly insightful for gaining understanding of the phenomenon. Organizations are often viewed as successes or failures based on their growth and survival. However, accounting for the nuances that contribute to the growth or decline of an organization's legitimacy provides deeper perspective beyond an organization's ability to grow or survive. According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy is "a generalized perception or assumption

that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially-constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Though evidence of the increase in online offerings’ legitimacy is visible throughout the higher education landscape, it may be most apparent in the popularity of online programs, schools’ willingness to invest in new online offerings, and in the comparable credentials awarded to students regardless of residential or distance instruction.

To this end, I discuss and apply literature regarding legitimacy, in particular, the role of organizational stakeholders, discursive narratives, and legitimacy sharing, as a lens to examine and understand decision makers’ views of online offerings and the role online offerings play within an institution’s larger organizational context. Decision makers’ perceptions of online offerings are intrinsically linked to and informed by their views of what functions of higher education are most legitimate, and their perception of the relationship between online offerings and these most legitimate functions.

Consequently, the efforts taken by institutions and the decisions that impact online offerings are inherently tied to institutional legitimacy and survival. While online offerings certainly have the potential to increase revenue and student access, which are both desirable outcomes for higher education institutions, understanding the driving purpose behind online offerings and their role in ensuring institutional legitimacy is a more complex topic.

### ***Academic Capitalism***

As organizational legitimacy theory aids in detailing the intricacies that higher education institutions have successfully navigated to expand their efforts from the physical classroom to the virtual one, academic capitalism theory focuses on the enrollment and revenue growth potential of online offerings and argues that universities are inherently linked with markets

(Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic capitalism positions universities “squarely in the marketplace and views the work of universities as commercial” (Silberman, 2020). Universities regularly endeavor to secure external revenue and then utilize the revenue to invest in new knowledge and technology to better position them to engage in the market (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Foundational to this theory is the concept that universities have shifted away from viewing education as a public good and have replaced it with a capitalistic perspective that views education as a private good to be bought and sold (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Bok (2009) outlines a similar notion; “Universities share one characteristic with compulsive gamblers and exiled royalty: there is never enough money to satisfy their desires” (p. 9). To this end, universities continually seek out new revenue streams as they attempt to build the finest facilities, attract renowned faculty, and recruit the brightest students (Bok, 2009).

Therefore, the money-generating potential of online education should not be overlooked when trying to ascertain how higher education decision makers perceive online education. As higher education institutions view participation within the online environment as a necessity for future institutional survival (Allen & Seaman, 2007, 2013; Seaman et al., 2018), and attempts to rationalize online course formats as avenues toward helping new student populations obtain their educational goals (Deal III, 2002; Karber, 2001), academic capitalism theory provides insight into these changes that accounts for the highly sought after revenue from online offerings and the increasing commercialization of higher education.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This dissertation explores how decision makers in various roles within a higher education institution perceive the purpose and role of online offerings at their institution. As many higher education institutions have grown to view online education as an essential function for survival

in the digital age, understanding this transition from an organizational perspective is less clear. Therefore, utilizing organizational theory as a foundation, I apply legitimacy theory to understand the acceptance and use of online offerings. I also apply academic capitalism theory to further detail how higher education institutions have successfully incorporated online offerings as a critical function of their institution. While many institutions have adapted to cater to the prospective online student population, most fail to account for how their perception of online offerings shapes these endeavors, challenges institutional norms, and possibly even contrasts with their institution's mission.

### **Research Questions**

The focus of this dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do online higher education decision makers perceive the purpose of online offerings?
- 2) What major factors influence online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings?
- 3) How do online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types?

Stemming from these questions, this dissertation seeks to understand what decision makers see as the legitimate functions of higher education institutions, how these views differ across personnel types, and ultimately how they shape perceptions of online offerings. In doing so, I seek to identify decision makers' understanding of what functions of higher education institutions are more legitimate than others, how perceptions of legitimate functions vary by personnel type, and how the institutional logics of higher education institutions have transformed due to the emergence of online education.

## Significance of the Study

While online offerings certainly increase access for student populations, they also serve as a crucial revenue stream for institutions. Although these two outcomes can and do occur synchronously, understanding the primary reason for online offerings from an organizational perspective will provide context to the present standing of online education. Through examining higher education decision makers and their perceptions of the purpose of online offerings, greater clarity of online offerings' purpose from an organizational perspective can be gained. Additionally, understanding their views of the purpose of online offerings can provide insight into the current state of online education and recent attempts to change or improve it, both of which will be helpful in shaping the future of online education.

Furthermore, as online offerings appear to be engrained into many colleges and universities' future plans as a critical component for institutional survival, online offerings do not neatly fit into higher education's governance structure. While higher education's shared governance approach attempts to provide transparency on the roles and responsibilities of the different personnel types, it fails to generate clarity regarding online offerings. As both an avenue to achieving long-term institutional goals and as a method of instruction, the responsibility of online offerings is truly shared between an institution's administration, its faculty, and its "third space" professionals.<sup>2</sup> Due to the sharedness and resulting ambiguity, the responsibility of online offerings and how individuals who share in this responsibility view the purpose of online offerings is not well-understood.

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<sup>2</sup> As Whitchurch (2012) describes, third space professionals are roles within higher education that blur the previously distinct lines separating the administration and the faculty. The third space arose out of increased competition for students and narrowing operating margins which increased the need for a managerial role that encompasses both academic and administrative functions (Whitchurch, 2012).

As such, there remains a need to understand and document perceptions of online offerings by personnel type within a higher education institution. In attempts to address this need, this research examines how roles within higher education perceive of online offerings and what factors shape their perceptions. Through understanding the influences that shape perceptions of online offerings, the current online experience can be better understood, challenged, and hopefully enhanced.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

The following definitions provide context for the purposes of this dissertation regarding online higher education. However, “One of the challenges for research into online learning is the lack of an authoritative definition of what constitutes this mode of education delivery” (Siemens et al., 2015, p. 99) . In other words, many terms with distinct meanings are used interchangeably to refer to online education.

*Distance education:* “The persons or institutions that provide instruction are separate in place and/or time from their learners. A range of teaching-learning relationships is involved, from largely self-directed to highly organized. Through a variety of communications media, instructors and students carry on a dialog that traditionally occurs face-to-face” (Moore, 1989, p. 8).

*Online learning:* “Online learning is a form of distance education where technology mediates the learning process, teaching is delivered completely using the internet, and students and instructors are not required to be available at the same time and place” (Siemens et al., 2015, p. 100). Completely using the internet means that online learning does not include traditional correspondence education or learning that does not utilize the internet, such as printed materials, video tapes/DVDs, or software programs that do not require the internet.

*Online course:* An online course is a course that is predominately delivered via the internet. Bejerano (2008) provides that online courses must provide at least 80% of the course content online (p. 409).

*Online offerings:* This study refers to online offerings as an institution of higher education's online courses. Online offerings also refer to a group or set of online courses that form an online program of study that leads to an online degree, certificate, certification, or badge.

*Higher education institution:* Higher education institutions are institutions that operate to provide post-secondary education. This dissertation uses higher education institutions to refer to nationally and regionally accredited colleges and universities within the United States of America.

*Administration:* The administration refers to college presidents and their staff. This role is responsible for setting and attaining institutional goals, managing and allocating resources for the institution, and for clearly coordinating and communicating the components of the academic community (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006). For the purposes of this study, the administration includes roles such as president, vice president, provost, vice provost, deans, executive directors, and their staff.

*Tenure-track faculty who teach online courses:* This group of faculty refers to higher education individuals who hold academic positions and primarily oversee "curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process" (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006). This group includes individuals who are predominately focused on research and/or teaching, have full-time academic appointments, hold professor positions, and who have



experience teaching both online and in face-to-face formats. Participants who hold academic appointments who are also responsible for administrative duties beyond teaching and research are grouped under the third space professional role.

*Third Space Professionals:* Third space professionals are responsible for overseeing the creation, implementation, and on-going management of college courses and degree programs (Whitchurch, 2012). Depending on the institution, they may also oversee faculty, staff, course content and curricula, budgets, marketing, student recruitment, and enrollment management. While third space professionals may hold unique job titles and fulfill different responsibilities from institution to institution, an overarching commonality is their responsibility to successfully direct and facilitate the launching and operations of college courses and programs. For the purposes of this study, third space professionals are defined as individuals responsible for launching, expanding, or managing online programs and their enrollment who do not clearly fall within the administration or faculty populations. Third space professionals include department heads, program heads, lead faculty, and program coordinators who are responsible for carrying out both academic and administrative functions.

## **Chapter 2: Review of Literature**

The following literature review details a set of concepts, theories, and applicable research in order to situate this dissertation within certain bodies of scholarship. This chapter begins with an accounting of the current state of online education, views and perspectives of online education's emergence and current role in higher education, as well as its strengths, opportunities, and limitations. As the significance of this dissertation is in linking perceptions of online course offerings to decisions impacting online education, I then discuss relevant research on decision making within higher education institutions. From there, I discuss research pertaining to various roles within higher education, how these roles have evolved since the emergence of online offerings, and how institution type and purpose have influenced the roles. Lastly, as this study utilizes a framework that encompasses legitimacy theory and academic capitalism theory, I provide an accounting of both theories, their limitations, and why they are particularly useful in understanding perceptions of online course offerings.

### **Positioning Online Education**

A discussion of online education is necessary to understand and account for perceptions of online offerings. Recently, due to COVID-19, discussions regarding online education are more frequent than in any point in history. While many institutions transitioned from residential to remote course experiences, which importantly is not synonymous with an online educational experience, the utilization of technology to provide education at a distance is now a necessity for higher education institutions (Alam & Asimiran, 2021; Teräs et al., 2020). An accounting of online education's current state, uses, and role will help to understand the various perceptions of online offerings within a higher education institution.

### *Online Education Uses*

The online education that exists today evolved from various iterations of distance education. Building upon much of the work of Wedemeyer (1981), the field of distance education has evolved over the last fifty years into a multifaceted field of research. Bryant et al. (2005) found more than 11 definitions for distance education, however, Keegan (1996) identified five components of distance education, which most of these definitions encompass. As a subset of distance education, online education also includes these five components: 1) the physical separation of the learner from the instructor; 2) the educational institution's influence on student services and curriculum related materials; 3) the utilization of media and technology; 4) the enablement for communication to be received and initiated by the learner; and 5) the physical separation of the learner from other learners (Keegan, 1996, p. 44). These components provide a much-needed structure that assists researchers in delimiting between how to provide online education and understanding what online education is, both of which influence perceptions of online education and its use.

Although online education is the most recent iteration of distance education, four previous models have existed, each building upon the former by leveraging emergent technologies (J. C. Taylor, 2001). While much of the distance education offered today is drastically different from previous iterations, understanding how distance education has evolved and how perceptions of online education are strongly influenced by perceptions of past iterations of distance education are vital to understanding current perceptions of online offerings.

The first model was the Correspondence Model, which relied primarily on print media. The second was the Multi-Media Model, which used a combination of print, audio, and video arrangements. The third was the Telelearning Model, which focused on providing a synchronous

learning experience using audio and video technologies. The fourth was the Flexible Learning model, which aimed to provide an asynchronous learning experience that leveraged audio and video technology through the internet. Finally, the fifth model is the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model, which is currently used to expand the Flexible Learning Model by utilizing new technologies in order to reduce the cost of attendance and improve economies of scale (Taylor, 2001). This most recent model is of primary interest to this research as it is the first that introduces economies of scale to distance education via the internet. Southern New Hampshire University could easily be the posterchild for this model. “You can’t be a small online player,” says Ed Klonoski, president of Charter Oak State College, a regional institution in Connecticut and one-time peer to Southern New Hampshire University (Blumenstyk, 2018). “LeBlanc built Southern New Hampshire for scale...and then went ahead and scaled it...and now he's killing me" (Blumenstyk, 2018).

However, Southern New Hampshire University is not the first to successfully scale online education and experience many of the financial benefits to doing so. For-profit institutions were certainly ahead of their time throughout the 1990s and 2000s when institutions like Corinthian College, ITT Tech, and DeVry University experienced unprecedented growth. In the wake of high-speed internet, Congress in 2006 abandoned the rule that forced institutions to enroll at least fifty percent of their students in a traditional in-person format. As a result, fueled by a large, underserved population of adult learners with federal student aid dollars in hand, for-profit institution enrollments exploded, and is most notable in the University of Phoenix, which saw enrollment reach over 450,000 in 2010 (Beaver, 2017).

Unfortunately for these for-profit institutions, the 2010s was largely a decade of increased government oversight of higher education. By 2011, student loan default rates reached

10 percent, the highest since 1994, and nearly “half of the defaults occurred at for-profit institutions, though they enrolled only 12 percent of postsecondary students” (Beaver, 2017). Federal investigations found that several for-profit institutions utilized questionable marketing and recruitments strategies, including urging students to falsify their financial information to receive federal student aid. While Congress moved to mitigate the aggressive tactics, news of the abusive practices wreaked havoc on the for-profit sector. Corinthian College’s publicly traded stock fell from thirty-three dollars to merely two cents in 2014, and the University of Phoenix went from boasting an enrollment close to half a million in 2010 to a headcount of just over 200,000 in 2016 (Beaver, 2017).

However, even after this fall, the student populations that many for-profit institutions served were still largely underserved by most traditional brick and mortar institutions. This gave Southern New Hampshire and other non-profit “mega-universities” such as Grand Canyon, Liberty, and Western Governors an opportunity to scale online education by “subverting many traditional higher education's hallmarks” (Gardner, 2019, para. 4). In fact, according to James Page, chancellor of the University of Maine system, the success of these non-profit mega-universities is “a rational response to the marketplace” (Gardner, 2019, para. 11). Similar to Walmart and Amazon, mega-universities focus on providing a “practical, convenient, and inexpensive” means to earning a college degree, and in so doing are changing “the shape and purpose of higher education” (Gardner, 2019, para. 6).

Yet, online offerings’ previous association with for-profit institutions has undoubtedly influenced how online education is perceived (Carey, 2019; Seaman et al., 2018). In the past decade, higher education institutions have maintained a perilous balancing act that seeks to continue improving the economies of scale provided through online education while remaining

committed to their various non-profit institutional missions. While previous attempts to provide online education focused on leveraging new media and technology to either enhance the educational experiences or expand access to education, which arguably may have produced new revenue, the Intelligent Flexible Learning Model combines these values while leveraging economies of scale, and in so doing forces the question: does online education exist to educate or to generate revenue? This question is central to this research, however, what follows will not be an attempt to answer it. Rather, this dissertation focuses on accounting for higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings, if and how they wrestle with the above question, and ultimately make sense of the purpose of online offerings in order to better understand the realities and experiences of key stakeholders who shape the online education experience.

### ***Technology and Online Education***

While technology has always assisted in the evolution of distance education, the technological advances of the last two decades have drastically altered distance education and have allowed for online education to emerge (Simonson & Schlosser, 2009; Sun & Chen, 2016). By the early 2000s, the internet was widespread. Personal computers had already entered millions of homes and were necessities in most workspaces. Email and other internet-based communication had emerged as major forms of interaction. Jerry Falwell Jr., former president of Liberty University, said their online offerings were initially "sort of limping along...and the institution was close to broke" (Gardner, 2019, para. 15). Then, once "people started getting high-speed internet in their homes in 2005, it really skyrocketed" (Gardner, 2019, para. 15).

Katz et al (2001) conducted a study from 1995-2000 analyzing individuals' perception of the internet and found positive average feedback from participants. Mehlinger (1996) examined

school reform in the face of the information age, which resulted in many districts establishing computer classes as a requirement for elementary students, and Mouza (2008) researched the positive effects of allowing high school students to use laptops. By 2000, higher education institutions' use of web-based course platforms such as WebCT and Blackboard were common (Lyons, 2004). Although online higher education was still mostly associated with for-profit institutions, the foundation of future online courses, Blackboard, had already solidified its position within the higher education environment (Li & Irby, 2008). The technological revolution that began in the 1990s, greatly encouraged the concept that teaching and learning were not confined to a traditional classroom setting (Deal III, 2002). Soon discussion boards, e-lectures, and video conferencing became major contributors to the higher education experience (Karber, 2001; Singh & Pan, 2004; Sun & Chen, 2016) and as such, were also influential in shaping perceptions of the higher education experience (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018).

Although some institutions grappled with the difficulties of shifting residential courses online due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many others were well prepared for the transition due to their prior investment in new software and technology (Alam & Asimiran, 2021). Additionally, in alignment with Taylor's (2001) Intelligent Flexible Learning Model, these new technologies have allowed institutions to essentially mass produce online offerings and fully realize online education's revenue-generating potential in an era when other revenue streams are drying out (Raja & Nagasubramani, 2018; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). This new focus is rationalized and legitimized as the practical use of available technology to further institutional missions, make sound financial decisions, move strategically to remain institutionally relevant, and address real issues concerning student access (Coyner & McCann, 2004; Cravener, 1999; Deal III, 2002; Li & Irby, 2008). To these ends, the understanding of what an online education experience is, and

what higher education is are changing. “Time, place, and pace do not play a dominating role as they did in the past. Those who have always interpreted teaching as the transfer of knowledge will realize that such teaching will disappear in the new world where the communication of information rules, where information is available to all and in abundance” (Brown, 2015, p. 228). The standardization and wide use of internet-based applications, software, and numerous other technologies to facilitate online offerings have made net revenues from online offerings and increased student access a reality for many colleges and universities.

The standardization of technologies that allow for scaling of online education and for subsequent new net revenue to become realized are certainly influential in shaping perceptions of online offerings. However, research that explores how these influences shape perceptions are under-examined.

### **Evaluating Online Education**

Perceptions of online offerings are developed through conscious and subconscious evaluations that seek to make sense of or to understand online offerings and their use. As previously discussed, technology contributes to these perceptions, however research tends to focus “not on which medium is best, but on what attributes of the medium can contribute to a positive, equivalent learning experience” (Simonson et al., 2011, p. 127). As such, research has fundamentally shifted attention away from the utilization of technology to reach learners, and on to how effective technologies are in facilitating a desirable teaching and learning environment (Howell & Baker 2006; Orellana et al. 2009; Sorensen & Baylen 2004; Tallent-Runnels et al. 2005). Importantly, this shift has resulted in a body of research that evaluates online education and ultimately makes comparisons between online and residential education. For example, a widely circulated narrative used by online higher education entrepreneurs is that online education



is of the same quality as traditional face-to-face education, but with greater flexibility and usually at a cheaper cost to institutions and to their students (Allen & Seaman, 2003). In 2002, institutional actors appealed to stakeholders saying that the question has always been, “Can it be as good” as face-to-face instruction? This question is now on the verge of being replaced by “how is it better” than face-to-face instruction? (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Common understanding of online offerings is intrinsically linked to comparisons of face-to-face instruction. How higher education decision makers perceive of online offerings is, to some extent, developed through an evaluation of online offerings that uses face-to-face instruction as the standard.

Comparing online education to the standard of residential education is common and much of the literature focuses on determining if online can be equal to that of a face-to-face education. Peters (1998) determined that those who hope for online education to utilize technology to create equivalent educational experiences to that of face-to-face instructions, “cherish a hope...that will prove to be serious self-delusion” (p. 155). Later in 2002, Peters reemphasized his prior claims, and concluded that “learning in virtual space will never be able to replace completely teaching in real spaces” (p. 104).

Mediated communication and actual communication stand in relationship to one another like a penciled sketch and an oil painting of the same subject. What takes place in a discussion between two or more people can only be transmitted in part electronically. A virtual university that does without face-to-face events by referring to the possibility of videoconferencing can only ever remain a surrogate university. There is no doubt that to a certain extent [videoconferencing] will improve the structure of communication in distance education—but it cannot ever take the place of personal communication. (Peters, 2002, p. 155)

Edmundson (2012), a professor of English at the University of Virginia argued that, “online education is a one-size-fits-all endeavor” (p. 3). It cannot be the equivalent of an in-

person classroom experience because by design it is a monologue experience, not a collaboration of ideas, which is where the best education occurs (Edmundson, 2012).

A more pessimistic view of online higher education is taken by Noble (1998), who argued that “quality higher education” will soon only be available to the wealthy who can still afford to attend legitimate brick and mortar institutions (p. 10). He equated online higher education to other discredited versions of distance education and correspondence courses and even describes online higher education as “digital diploma mills” (p. 10).

Roberto and Johnson (2019) examined employer perceptions of prospective employees based on whether their college degree was earned via face-to-face instruction or online. The researchers found that employers view face-to-face degrees more positively than online degrees.

Terras et al. (2018) highlight a major challenge of online programs is the disconnection between students and the institution. While online offerings allow for students to be physically removed from brick and mortar campuses, faculty, and other students, a correlation exists between student retention and a student’s sense of connection to the institution (Terras et al., 2018).

Many of these negative views of online higher education derive from associations with diploma mills or for-profit institutions. Reid’s (1959) study defines diploma mills as having no classrooms, possessing nontenured faculty with unscrupulous credentials, and being run by profit-minded instead of education-minded managers. Connections are also drawn between online higher education and for-profit institutions (Morey, 2004; Soley, 1998). These studies reveal how both online and for-profit institutions rely on aggressive marketing strategies to target susceptible student populations, treat students more as customers, and focus on student recruitment and retention much more than student learning outcomes.

Although many institutions were, and some still are concerned with the quality of online offerings largely due to online education's association with for-profit institutions and poor academic rigor (Hara & Kling, 1999; Morey, 2004; Soley, 1998), these concerns seem to be based more on perception than on data. Means et al. (2009) evaluated 51 studies that compared online education with face-to-face instruction and found that "on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction" (p. xi). Importantly, however, Means et al. (2009) argue that these findings should not be interpreted as online education being superior to residential instruction. Instead, "it is the combination of elements in the treatment conditions, which are likely to include additional learning time and materials as well as additional opportunities for collaboration that has proven effective" (Means et al., 2009, p. 51). However, whether and to what extent these factors contribute to program administrators' perceptions of online offerings is largely underexamined.

While COVID-19 certainly revealed many benefits of investing in online offerings, many institutions either struggled to adopt or actively resisted online education prior to the pandemic (Alam & Asimiran, 2021; Chen, 2009; Teräs et al., 2020). In a study that identified the barriers to implementing online education, Berge and Muilenburg (2001) surveyed 1,462 online education professionals, researchers, and students and were able to identify 64 barriers that preclude higher education institutions from launching online offerings. The ten most commonly cited barriers were as follows (Muilenburg & Berge, 2001, pp. 11–13):

1. Administrative structure: Managing distance learning programs through the existing administrative structure can be problematic. Partnerships among different units within an organization or among different organizations require agreements on fiscal issues such as costs, tuition and fees, and distribution of revenue, as well as scheduling and issuance of credits.
2. Organizational change: Organizations are resistant to change. Without a shared vision for distance learning, a strategic plan, and key players within the organization who are

knowledgeable and supportive of distance learning, implementing a distance learning program is a slow and difficult process.

3. **Technical expertise, support, and infrastructure:** It is difficult to keep pace with technological change. Many instructors lack the knowledge and skills to design and teach distance learning courses, yet their organizations lack support staff to assist with technical problems, to develop distance learning course materials, or to provide distance learning training.
4. **Social interaction and program quality:** Participants in distance learning courses can feel isolated due to lack of person-to-person contact. There are concerns about the quality distance learning courses, programs, and student learning. Testing and assessment of student outcomes is also a concern.
5. **Faculty compensation and time:** Distance learning courses require a greater time commitment, so faculty compensation, incentives, and release time are important issues.
6. **Threat of technology:** Some educators fear that an increase in the use of distance learning technologies may decrease the need for teachers. Feeling intimidated by technology may also threaten an instructor's sense of competence or authority.
7. **Legal issues:** The increasing use of (in particular) the Internet to deliver distance learning raises concerns about copyright, fair-use policies, piracy, intellectual-property rights, and problems with hackers and viruses.
8. **Evaluation/effectiveness:** There is concern over a lack of research supporting the effectiveness of distance learning as well as a lack of effective evaluation methods for distance learning courses and programs.
9. **Access:** Many students lack access to necessary hardware, software, or the Internet, or there are concerns over equal access to courses offered via newer technologies such as Web-based instruction.
10. **Student-support services:** Provision of student services such as advisement, library services, admissions, and financial aid is a critical facet of any distance learning program.

Simonson et al. (2011) argues that the majority of Berge and Muilenburg's (2001) top ten list are considered barriers due to the "organizational culture" of higher education institutions and not due to insufficiencies of the particular medium (p. 131). Related studies by Simonson (2001), which utilized focus groups and Chen (2009), which analyzed secondary data from NCES, found similar barriers to Berge and Muilenburg (2001). These findings are relevant to understanding

perceptions of online offerings even after successful implementation of online programs. Barriers to implementation may have long lasting impacts on staff, faculty, and students and likely contribute to shaping perspectives of online offerings.

These perspectives reveal unpopular views of online education by institutional stakeholders and serve to support the need to better understand if and how similar factors influence higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings. My research aims to fill this need by adding to the literature regarding online education through identifying how online offerings are perceived and the various factors influencing these perceptions.

### **Online Education Benefits**

While various factors likely contribute to negative perspectives of online offerings, there are also numerous arguments in favor of online education. One of the largest selling points for higher education institutions interested in online offerings is the potential increase in net revenue. Over a five-year span, the revenues in the online industry were correctly predicted to climb from \$550 million in 1998 to \$11.4 billion in 2003 (Singh & Pan, 2004). During a time when many state governments were cutting higher education budgets and institutional leaders were facing decisions to increase tuition rates, online education appeared as a sound alternative (Ortagus & Yang, 2018). Today, online education is a rapidly-growing market valued around \$250 billion and projected to increase to \$1 trillion by 2027 (Nagel, 2021). Institutions that provide online offerings not only collect the tuition dollars of students who attend online, but also greatly increase their prospective student pool by removing the constraints of having to enroll residentially. However, identifying the balance between using online offerings to achieve institutional mission and using online offerings to increase revenues is another area in need of greater examination.

Additionally, online offerings afford students greater flexibility than face-to-face education. Karber (2001) details how online programs present themselves as the feasible solution for full-time working students and for students with families. Sheail (2018) examines the concept of flexibility in online education and notes that while online courses are more flexible and contribute to increased student access, they should not be marketed as free from any and all time constraints. Deal III (2002) shows how online higher education appeals to students who are physically located far from brick and mortar schools. Lyons (2004) furthers these claims by identifying three populations enticed by online higher education: 1) busy working adults looking to advance or change their careers; 2) individuals incapable of attending college due to the physical location; and 3) stay-at-home parents (p. 448).

Online education is also valued for its potential to increase student access and address concerns related to student equity. Access and equity have long been areas of concern for most colleges and universities (Astin & Oseguera, 2004). Access to information and to an education is believed by many to be a right regardless of time restrictions, geography, finances, and family constraints (Karber, 2001; Mupinga, 2005; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2019; Taylor, 2003). Online higher education provides a “time-independent and place-independent learning environment,” which allows access to populations of students previously excluded from higher education (Deal III, 2002, p. 24; Hammonds, 2003). Furthermore, many higher education institutions’ missions include educating the citizenry and benefiting the surrounding community, but enrollment data reveal that most schools struggle to serve low-income and underrepresented student populations from these communities (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Karber (2001) showed how online higher education addresses issues of student access by creating new online opportunities for low-income and underrepresented students to attend college. Deal III (2002)

added that online higher education has “opened the doors of the classroom to the world around us” (p. 21). Similarly, while many colleges and universities have struggled to adopt equitable admissions practices or to create pathways to college for anyone who desires to attend, Singh and Pan (2004) show how online education can be utilized as a solution to these concerning issues. Although research reveals how online offerings can be utilized to increase student equity and access, the degree to which these factors influence decision makers’ perceptions of online offerings is less known.

Another shared value of most higher education institutions is the concept of a broad educational experience filled with numerous varying perspectives. In fact, one defining feature of the university is the gathering of multiple disciplines and the collaboration of different views and perspectives. By eliminating physical requirements and distance limitations, online higher education can extend to thousands of students in hundreds of countries, each with unique perspectives (Deal III, 2002; Karber, 2001; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2019). Building on this notion, Li and Irby (2008) added that as students interact with differing perspectives, they develop broader and more informed views on issues and the world. However, the extent to which viewing online offerings as an avenue toward diversifying student perspectives and enhancing the educational experience influences decision makers’ perceptions of online offerings is another area with limited research.

While debate continues as to whether online education has achieved the status or legitimacy comparable to residential education (Haynes, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018), institutions are relying on their employees to manage and expand the use of online offerings. However, how individuals in these roles perceive of online offerings is not well understood. As higher education personnel make decisions regarding online offerings, their perceptions of online education are

influenced by numerous factors, including many of the uses and views previously mentioned in this chapter. As such, in light of these influences, the focus of this dissertation seeks to understand how various roles within a higher education institution perceive of online offerings in order to account for the decisions that impact online offerings and shape the online education landscape.

### **Decision Making**

Understanding decision makers' perceptions of online offerings is of particular significance because of the influence that perceptions have in the decision-making process that directly impact the online experience. As such, a review of literature pertaining to organizational decision making and more specifically decision making in higher education institutions is warranted.

### ***Bounded Rationality***

Foundational to understanding organizational decision making is accounting for the contributions of Simon (1947, 1955), March and Simon (1958), and Cyert and March (1963), who argued for the notion of bounded rationality in decision making, which was a significant shift from approaching decision making from a purely rational context. Simon, March, and Cyert and the concept of bounded rationality are largely responsible for the formation and success of the Carnegie Tradition, which focuses on studying organizational behavior and accounting for the realities within organizations that shape and influence decision-making processes. In attempts to gauge the impact of the Carnegie Tradition, Gavetti et al. (2007) found that the three foundational works (Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1947) were cited approximately 10,000 times in the last fifty years (pp. 523- 524).



While the notion of decision making within bounded rationality agrees with that of pure rationality in that individuals aim to approach decision making rationally, it differs by arguing that individuals are limited by incomplete information and their own abilities, which create irrational decision makers (March, 1994). Following this logic, decision making can be understood as an evaluation of the available information and the decision maker's ability to utilize the available information toward rational outcomes (Simon, 1955).

The concept of bounded rationality was then expanded by March and Simon (1958) and then again by Cyert and March (1963). Utilizing Simon's (1955) work, March and Simon (1958, 1993) published *Organizations*, which presented a "theory of formal organizations" which relied heavily upon organizational decision making and "the flow of information within organizations that instructs, informs, and supports decision making processes" (March & Simon, 1993, p. 3). Here, the decision maker is viewed as the processor of information (Mahoney, 2005), and as the decision maker processes information, they seek to narrow the gap between the organization's current state and the organization's desired future state by searching for new solutions (March & Simon, 1958). These views support the aim of my research to examine various roles within a higher education institution as decision makers whose perceptions of online offerings are influenced by a variety of factors, which are then processed and used to inform decisions.

Later, Cyert and March (1963) published *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, which originated out of concerns regarding the complexity of organizations, the problems that derive from complex organizational structures, and the impact of these problems on organizational decision-making. The behavioral theory understands the firm as a multifaceted organization, often with competing goals, and numerous decision makers. Cyert and March (1963) endeavored to acknowledge these realities in order to determine the key variables contributing to the

decision-making process. To this end, Cyert and March (1963) identified four variables: organizational goals, organizational expectations, organizational choice, and organizational control (Cyert & March, 1963). Additionally, the authors identified four supplemental concepts that influence decision-making within organizations, which include quasi resolution of conflict, uncertainty avoidance, problematic search, and organizational learning (Cyert & March, 1963).

The notions of bounded rationality in decision making and Behavioral Theory (Cyert & March, 1963) are essential to identify higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings and account for how their perceptions influence decisions regarding online offerings. Broadly defined, perception is the result of an individual's ability to regard, understand, or interpret something. Using available information, higher education professionals process information to make decisions to achieve desirable outcomes. However, in this context the available information is limited as are the employees' ability to process information rationally. Additionally, any individual's goals and desired outcomes are likely unique to their role within the institution or department, and possibly at odds with other department's goals or even the goals of the university. My research aims to better understand these perceptions of online offerings and what information is influencing them.

### ***Decision Making in Online Higher Education***

Decision making in higher education institutions is uniquely complex due to the broad organizational goals of higher education institutions and the de-centralized power structures that exists in many colleges and universities. As such, a review of decision making within higher education is necessary to account for these complexities and to understand how perceptions of online offerings within higher education institutions influence decisions impacting online offerings.

While limited research has explored the decision-making process regarding online education, researchers have identified four models that categorize how online education is implemented across various institutional structures. Although these models do not specifically address the decision-making process, they do provide context to the organizational structure in which decisions regarding online education are made. The first is the independent model, where the implementing unit is separate from the traditional academic departments and implementation is solely the responsibility of the independent unit. The second is the “lone wolf” model (Bates, 2000), where individual faculty pursue and implement their own instance of online coursework and programs. The third is the siloed model where full departments or colleges work to create and implement online courses but do not typically collaborate with individuals outside of the department or college. Finally, the integrated model utilizes a central unit that is responsible for working and collaborating with units across the institution to produce a more standardized online experience (Laird, 2004; Nicoll, 2016, p. 32; Paolucci & Gambescia, 2007; Smith & Rhoades, 2006). Naturally, each model will undoubtedly influence how decisions are made and who is involved in the process. While my research focuses on perceptions from various roles within a higher education institution, regardless of model, future research should explore each model’s strengths and weaknesses and how the connections between perception and decision making is impacted in each model.

### ***Decision Making and Shared Governance***

In order to appreciate many of the nuances of decision making in higher education institutions, it is worth to first briefly discuss the concept of shared governance. The shared governance model has dominated higher education for much of the past century (Tierney & Lechuga, 2004). “The variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher

education produce an inescapable interdependence among the governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others” (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006, para. 2). At its core, shared governance attempts to bring together the major stakeholder groups of any college or university and through collaboration, identify and coordinate the responsibilities of each group to steer the institution (Crellin, 2010). Ideally, shared governance gives voice to faculty, and in so doing, it allows for the academy to remain a core entity of the institution. Additionally, institutions of higher education need leadership and administration, and shared governance provides administrators the ability to respond to challenges and strategically plan for future success (Birnbaum, 1992; Curry, 1992; Walker, 1979).

However, shared governance creates a considerable amount of confusion regarding power, responsibility, and decision making (Eckel, 2000). For example, the *Statement on Government and Universities* jointly formed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the American Council on Education (ACE), and the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB), regarding shared governance views the college president and their staff as responsible for planning and the achievement of institutional goals. They are to “envision new horizons for the institution... and at times, with or without support, infuse new life into a department” (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006, para. 23). Yet, the statement also details that the “faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction” (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006, para. 27). While the statement attempts to provide clarity to the governing of higher education institutions, certain endeavors, such as launching and managing online programs, cannot be easily attributed to one group. The president may wish to leverage online offerings to achieve the institution’s mission

and goals, however faculty maintain primary responsibility over methods of instruction. Olson (2009) equates shared governance as an "empty" or "floating" signifier, "a term so devoid of determinate meaning that it takes on whatever significance a particular speaker gives it at the moment" (p. 2). Olson (2009) describes that while faculty members believe that shared governance allows faculty the freedom to focus on academics or "the heart of the university" (p. 1), and that administrators are left to perform the "more distasteful managerial labor" (p. 2), the administration has opposing views (Crellin, 2010; Olson, 2009). Higher education administrators view shared governance as a pathway to incorporate faculty as "important contributors to the conversation," but that ultimately, decisions that impact the future of the institution should be "the purview of the administration" (Crellin, 2010, p. 72).

Furthermore, faculty unionization adds to the multifarious power dynamics present in shared governance models. Unions within shared governance models have long been viewed as incompatible, which has ultimately resulted in a decrease in faculty power in decision making (Kezar & Dizon, 2021). As a result, many faculty unions have organized to increase their influence and expand their purview regarding institutional governance (Aronowitz, 2006). However, more recent research suggests that faculty unions play an integral and complementary role within shared governance models (Kezar & Dizon, 2021). Suffice it to say, shared governance introduces additional complexities to the decision-making process that shape online offerings. Accounting for these complexities, while exploring how perceptions of online offerings vary by employee role, will bring greater insight to the factors shaping perceptions of online offerings throughout the institution.

Quite fitting for higher education institutions that utilize shared governance, March (1994) provides insight to decision making when it involves multiple actors or groups. Decision

making is divided into two categories based on the group making the decision: group decision making where preferences and identities are aligned, or consistent, and group decision making where preferences and identities are misaligned, or inconsistent (March, 1994; Zolar, 2018).

March (1994) refers to the first group as a team, or “a collection of individuals with problems of uncertainty but without conflicts of interests or identities” (p. 104). However, March (1994) concludes that the second group is much more common in large complex organizations. As a result, organizations should endeavor to align preferences and identities within decision making groups and work toward building coalitions (March, 1994). March (1994) suggests that coalitions occur when individuals involved in decision making form alliances that allow individuals to realize some or all of their preferences and identities.

However, coalitions can be difficult to form in organizations that suffer from ambiguity, which is often the case for institutions of higher education. March (1994) explains ambiguity as the “lack of clarity or consistency in reality, causality or intentionality” (p. 178) and, in regard to the decision-making process, ambiguity transforms the process from an orderly one into one of “constructing meaningful interpretations of fundamentally confusing worlds” (March, 1994, p. 179; Zolar, 2018, p. 25). As a result, organizations utilize “delegation-oriented management strategies, and appear to be chaotic in that decisions do not appear linked to actions from a rational perspective” (Zolar, 2018, p. 25). Often, the decision-making coalitions are unstable, experience difficulty implementing decision, and suffer from apathy and attrition (March, 1994).

One model particularly insightful to understanding the role of ambiguity in higher education decision-making process is the garbage can model. Cohen and March (1974) explain that foundational to the model is the existence of an organized anarchy, which is characterized by: 1.) problematic preferences, 2.) unclear technology, and 3.) fluid participation. Although

organizations that fit this description appear seemingly unsystematic in their decision-making processes, Cohen and March (1974) argue that decision-making within an organized anarchy is logical and can be understood. The underlying concepts of organized anarchies were later supported by Weick (1976) who discussed large complex organizations as loosely coupled systems. According to Cohen and March (1974), organizations with the above three characteristics have difficulty incorporating rational and efficient decision-making processes. Ideally, an organization would implement a process that would evaluate any given problem in order to provide a solution to the problem being evaluated. The process would also include an examination of the potential consequences created by the proposed solution and a further examination of possible solutions to these new consequences. Finally, in considering all of the above and evaluating the proposed solution against the organization's goals, the organization would make a decision (Cohen & March, 1974). Unfortunately, organizations labeled as organized anarchies are rarely able to implement such streamlined processes. Possessing problematic preferences, unclear technology, and fluid participation essentially eliminates the possibility for establishing a clear and systematic method of decision-making (Cohen & March, 1974). The garbage can model can assist researchers in understanding how organizational anarchies, like many higher education institutions, navigate the decision-making process, however it may prove less useful in understanding processes that involve a sole decision maker.

In 2004, Kezar and Eckel reviewed literature on higher education leadership and highlighted that recent changes across the higher education landscape had produced a plethora of research focused on leadership qualities including decision making. Specially, research targeted trends for effective leaders and the ability to quickly adapt in order to address emerging concerns through innovated approaches (Kezar & Eckel, 2004; Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). However,

Kezar and Eckel (2004) found that too much emphasis was given to explaining decision making through structural theories, while more attention was needed to account for social and cultural implications influencing decision making. Accounting for these implications in identifying perceptions of online offerings will bring greater insight to the factors shaping perceptions of online offerings across the institution.

### **Roles in Higher Education**

As discussed, this research examines perceptions by professional roles within a higher education institution based on their decision-making influence that shape online offerings. Utilizing the Statement on Government and Universities regarding shared governance and the present ambiguity regarding the purview of online offerings, this research examines the perceptions of the president or their administration and the perceptions of faculty regarding online offerings. However, the line between the administration and the faculty is much less distinct and has created what Whitchurch (2012) describes as the “third space” in higher education. Within higher education institutions, the previously distinct line that separated academia and the administration has eroded. Increased competition for students and narrowing operating margins have increased the need for a managerial role that encompasses both academic and administrative functions. Individuals in this “third space” play critical roles in decisions that impact what courses and programs are offered online, the design of courses and programs, and how successful those courses and programs are in terms of achieving student learning outcomes and from an enrollment management perspective (Whitchurch, 2012). As such, this research also examines these third space professionals’ perceptions of online offerings.



### *Administration*

Presidents and their staff, referred to here as the administration, provide organizational leadership and direction to the institution. The administration is responsible for setting and attaining goals, and for clearly coordinating and communicating the components of the academic community (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006). Additionally, the administration is responsible for managing and allocating resources for the institution. For the purposes of this study, the administration includes roles such as president, vice president, provost, vice provost, deans, executive directors, and their staff.

Regarding administrative perceptions of online offerings, since 2000, online higher education in the U.S. has increased in popularity to the extent that the majority of higher education presidents view participation within the online environment as a necessity for future institutional survival (Allen & Seaman, 2007, 2013; Seaman et al., 2018).

Parker et al. (2011), found that while only 29% of the public viewed online education as equivalent to face-to-face instruction, 51% of college presidents argued that both methods provide equal value. Additionally, over half of the college presidents surveyed believe that most of their future students will enroll in online courses (Parker et al., 2011).

More recently, in response to COVID-19, Turk et al. (2020) surveyed nearly 300 college presidents and found that sustaining online learning was a major pressing issue for college presidents. While the majority of college presidents saw enrollment declines in 2020, the presidents who experienced enrollment increases attributed the gains to the “expansion of online class offerings” (Turk et al., 2020, p. 5). Additionally, one of the surveyed presidents emphasized the importance of their institution’s preexisting online and distance education offerings, noting

that “some of our local students who might normally go to another university are instead staying” and enrolling in online course offerings (Turk et al., 2020, p. 6).

### ***Faculty***

Compared to the administration, higher education faculty are a much less ambiguous group. Faculty hold academic positions and primarily oversee “curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process” (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006).

Additionally, faculty determine program and degree requirements, learning outcomes, and are responsible for instruction and evaluating student learning. Faculty often form committees and governing bodies to create consistency across disciplines where appropriate and to oversee policy review, the creation of new programs of study, changes to curriculum, and method of instruction.

Researchers have previously examined faculty perceptions of online offerings. Faculty report that students experience more frustration with online learning and find that students desire more interaction with instructors and clearer or additional assignment instructions (Hara & Kling, 1999; Terras et al., 2018). Faculty also express frustrations with online higher education. Compared to face-to-face instruction, research reveals faculty frustrations with the workload of teaching online, the lack of student engagement and student contact, as well as with learning and using new technologies (Bolliger et al., 2019; Cravener, 1999; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009).

However, research also shows favorable views of online education by college faculty. Online offerings eliminate the need for faculty to live near the schools they teach at or even to physically attend and hold classes on a campus (Coyner & McCann, 2004). Adjunct faculty can

easily teach courses at multiple institutions and the time spent traveling between schools is eliminated (Li & Irby, 2008). Additionally, Parthasarathy and Smith (2009) examined faculty perceptions and found that faculty who teach online believe that online courses improve the image of the institution and place the school in a competitive position to meet student and market demands. However, the extent to which these factors influence higher education decision makers perceptions of online offerings and shape decisions that impact online offerings is under examined.

### ***Third Space Professionals***

Third space professionals are a vital component of this research that aims to understand and document perceptions of online offerings by different roles within institutions. However, the role and responsibilities of third space professionals are quite vague and defined differently across institutions. Job descriptions for third space professionals are often purposefully broad to increase flexibility in monitoring and managing course and program offerings. At their core, third space professionals are responsible for overseeing the creation, implementation, and on-going management of college courses and degree programs. Depending on the institution, they may also oversee faculty, staff, course content and curricula, budgets, marketing, student recruitment, and enrollment management. While third space professionals may hold unique job titles and fulfill different responsibilities from institution to institution, an overarching commonality is their responsibility to successfully direct and facilitate the launching and operations of college courses and programs.

For the purposes of this study, third space professionals are individuals responsible for launching, expanding, or managing online programs and their enrollment who do not clearly fall within the administration or faculty populations. Third space professionals include department

heads, program heads, lead faculty, and program coordinators who are responsible for carrying out both academic and administrative functions. Due to their unique position that spans across academia and administration, third space professionals of online offerings have the potential to significantly influence the future of online education. However, there is little research that examines program administrators and very little is known regarding program administrators' perceptions of online offerings.

Özcan and Yildirim (2018) researched third space professionals' motives for offering online degree programs in Turkey and found that motives varied from attempting to meet student demand, obtaining revenue, and supporting institutional mission. However, this research focused primarily on the decision to launch online offerings and does not explain perceptions of online offerings already being offered or the factors that shape third space professionals' perceptions.

Killian (2020) compared the perceptions of online education between third space professionals and faculty at community colleges in Arkansas. The study found that third space professionals' perceptions were similar to faculty perceptions and only differed regarding learning outcomes (Killian, 2020). While this research focused primarily on comparing perceptions between faculty and third space professionals, it is limited to only community colleges in Arkansas and does not account for the factors that influence perceptions.

As such, there remains a need to understand and document the various perceptions of online offerings present within higher education institutions. As decision makers that shape the online educational experience, this research examines how roles within higher education perceive of online offerings and account for the factors that shape their perceptions. Through understanding the influences that shape perceptions of online offerings, the current online experience can be better understood, challenged, and hopefully enhanced.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Key to uncovering perceptions of online offerings is first understanding what higher education personnel see as the primary purpose of their specific institution, their department, and even their program. Perceptions of online offerings can then be understood in terms of online offerings' relationship to the primary purpose. Online offerings may be perceived as vital pathways for executing on what is perceived as the primary purpose of higher education (i.e., mission-aligned endeavors), however this approach also affords for online offerings to be viewed as more supportive in fulfilling the primary purpose (i.e., revenue generation for the institution).

To this end, I utilized both legitimacy theory and academic capitalism theory to understand the perceptions of online offerings and the factors influencing their perceptions that exist throughout higher education institutions. While each theory is widely applied in literature, I find a strategic advantage in utilizing both. Legitimacy theory explains perceptions in terms of alignment to cultural norms or the degree that something is proper. Something is legitimate when it is perceived to be appropriate or aligned to an agreed-upon purpose. Whereas academic capitalism explains higher education institutions' actions as being market driven. If online offerings exist to generate revenue and are successful in achieving this purpose, they could be understood utilizing both legitimacy theory and academic capitalism. However, if the purpose of online offerings is something other than to generate revenue, then using online offerings to increase revenue should be viewed as an illegitimate endeavor, regardless of their revenue generating capacity. While universities need revenue to survive, pursuing endeavors primarily for financial return is unbecoming for any non-profit institution, especially when these efforts are so closely associated with the core functions of the institution, such as instruction and course offerings (Kezar, 2008; Zemsky et al., 2005). As such, utilizing both theories allows for

perceptions of online offerings throughout higher education institutions to be accounted for and understood.

### **Legitimacy**

Utilizing legitimacy theory is particularly insightful for gaining understanding of perceptions across different roles in higher education. According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially-constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Through a legitimacy theory lens, perceptions of online offerings can be understood based on online offerings’ alignment to what individuals recognize as their goal and purpose. However, online offerings cannot be thought of as legitimate without also accounting for the larger institutional context. The higher education institution is the setting of the “socially-constructed system of norms, values, and beliefs” in which these perceptions that determine legitimacy are made (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). As such, a review of organizational legitimacy theory is appropriate.

Most legitimacy literature builds upon Weber (1978) and Parsons (1960) evaluative perspectives that legitimacy is the social construction of rules based on widely-shared values, and that legitimacy is attributed to organizations whose behavior aligns with society’s constructed rules. Building upon this idea, several researchers argued that legitimacy is a resource that allows organizations to strategically gain competitive positioning to compete for valuable resources and increase their likelihood of survival (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

Later, Meyer and Scott (1983) shifted the legitimacy discussion from evaluative to cognitive by linking legitimacy to culture, suggesting that legitimacy concerns the congruence

between an organization and the culture in which it exists, and that “organizational legitimacy refers to the degree of cultural support for an organization” (p. 201). Continuing, Suchman (1995) argued, “within this tradition, legitimacy and institutionalization are virtually synonymous” (p. 576). In linking legitimacy to organizational behavior, Meyer and Scott (1983) stated that legitimacy is “the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for existence” (p. 201). This shift positioned organizational legitimacy away from being simply labeled culturally desirable and instead explained it as having support and understanding in relation to the environment.

Recognizing that an organization derives this support from institutional stakeholders, Aldrich and Fiol (1994) identified two distinct categories: socio-political legitimacy and cognitive legitimacy. Socio-political legitimacy “refers to the process by which key stakeholders, the general public, key opinion leaders, or government officials accept a venture as appropriate and right, given existing norms and laws” (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648). Socio-political legitimacy can be examined by assessing public endorsement of an organization or of an organization’s leaders. Cognitive legitimacy, however, involves the level of knowledge and familiarity an environment has regarding an organization. Cognitive legitimacy is highest when the environment takes for granted “a new product, process, or service” (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994, p. 648).

Suchman (1995), attempting to bring clarification to the definition of legitimacy, sought the adoption of an “inclusive, broad-based definition of legitimacy that incorporates both the evaluative and the cognitive dimensions” (p. 573). Most legitimacy researchers since Suchman (1995) have either built upon his definition of legitimacy or have simply adopted the definition and used it in their own writings (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 31). Suchman (1995) argued that

legitimacy is “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially-constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Deephouse et al. (2017) later succinctly articulated that Suchman’s (1995) definition of legitimacy allows legitimacy to encompass two general perspectives: a strategic perspective, which focuses on how legitimacy is utilized to achieve goals, and an institutional perspective, which is concerned with the embeddedness of social norms and values within organizations (p. 31). Put another way, the strategic perspective is one where an institution’s managers are within the organization looking outward at the environment, and the institutional perspective is one where the environment is looking in toward the organization (Suchman, 1995).

Suchman (1995) identified three types of legitimacy: pragmatic, moral or normative, and cognitive. Pragmatic legitimacy concerns the support for an organization by constituencies in relation to their own self-interests. Moral legitimacy, unlike pragmatic legitimacy, does not reside in support for an organization based on self-interests or personal gain, but rather renders support if behavior is right or ethical. Lastly, Suchman (1995) introduced cognitive legitimacy, which involves a passive support for an organization based on taken-for-grantedness as established by cultural norms (p. 582). Suchman (1995) suggested that as one moves from pragmatic, to moral, to cognitive, “legitimacy becomes more elusive to obtain and more difficult to manipulate, but it also becomes more subtle, more profound, and more self-sustaining” (p. 585). While all three types of legitimacy are usually simultaneously present and often mutually reinforcing, circumstances do arise where the different types of legitimacy directly challenge one another.



Also, in 1995, Scott published *Institutions and Organizations*, in which he presented the case for classifying institutions into three pillars: regulative, normative, and cognitive. Each of the pillars provides a unique basis for organizational legitimacy. However, unlike resource dependency, which tends to treat legitimacy as a resource, the institutional perspective from which all of the pillars originate views legitimacy as “a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws” (Scott, 1995, p. 45). This perspective built upon Meyer and Scott’s (1983) work that suggested “organizational legitimacy refers to the degree of cultural support for an organization” (p. 201).

Through a legitimacy theory lens perceptions of online offerings can be understood based on online offerings’ alignment to what is recognized as the goal and purpose of online offerings. Additionally, legitimacy theory accounts for the larger institutional context in which online offerings exist. The perceived goal and purpose of online offerings are not only evaluated based on how strongly aligned online offerings are to the institution’s goals, but they are also evaluated based on their contribution toward achieving or supporting the institution’s goals. As such, a legitimacy theory lens is instrumental in distinguishing if online offerings are perceived as the legitimate activity that furthers an institution’s mission, or if online offerings are being utilized in more of a supporting role so that the legitimate functions of the institutions may occur.

### ***Evaluating Legitimacy***

As this research seeks to utilize legitimacy theory to understand perceptions of online education and subsequent decision making, it is pertinent to briefly discuss evaluations of legitimacy. Deephouse and Suchman (2008) postulated that “an organization is either legitimate or illegitimate,” and that whether an organization is legitimate or not is dependent on the perceptions of its stakeholders (p. 64). Later, Deephouse et al. (2017) presented a more nuanced

evaluation that included four general tiers or outcomes of an evaluation of an organization's legitimacy: accepted, proper, debated, and illegitimate. Accepted legitimacy is fundamentally passive, where discussions regarding legitimacy and challenges to legitimacy are nonexistent. Again, this legitimacy is accompanied with a certain taken-for-grantedness, and the institution, without question, is widely accepted as appropriate. Institutions with proper legitimacy, while at times may be deemed equally appropriate as institutions with accepted legitimacy, receive their legitimacy through conscious judgements. Instead of being legitimate as a result of being taken for granted as appropriate, institutions with proper legitimacy receive it as a result of an evaluation of the institution's legitimacy. To some extent proper legitimacy is earned or proven, whereas accepted legitimacy just is (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 33). Institutions with debated legitimacy are not widely supported by stakeholders as appropriate. Debated legitimacy means just that: institutional stakeholders disagree regarding the appropriateness of institutional actions, goals, or structure. Lastly, an illegitimate legitimacy status is attributed to institutions deemed inappropriate. Instead of debate regarding whether an institution is appropriate, illegitimate status is reached through consensus as to the inappropriateness of the institution (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 33). For the purposes of understanding perceptions of online higher education from organizational legitimacy perspective, Deephouse et al.'s (2017) evaluation of legitimacy tiers serves as a useful metric.

### ***Stakeholders***

As discussed, stakeholders play a vital role in determining an organization's legitimacy. While higher education institutions have a wide range of stakeholders, this research focuses primarily on the roles that serve in some decision-making capacity that influence online

offerings; namely the administration, the faculty, and third space professionals. Therefore, a review of literature examining the role of stakeholders in affording legitimacy is beneficial.

Deephouse and Suchman (2008) postulated that “an organization is either legitimate or illegitimate,” and that organizational legitimacy is dependent on the perceptions of its stakeholders (Deephouse et al., 2017, p. 33). While Suchman’s (1995) definition of legitimacy offers legitimacy as a general perception that an organization’s actions are thought to be appropriate based upon “some socially constructed system of norms” (p. 574), organizational legitimacy may be better understood as stakeholders’ perception of an organization’s alignment with some socially-constructed system of norms. Scott (1995) furthers this notion in stating that the concept of legitimacy as cultural support for an organization manifests itself through the endorsement of stakeholders or “significant others” in positions of authority or power whose support of an organization results in its legitimization (p. 46).

Ruef and Scott (1998) defined stakeholder as individuals or groups “who make legitimacy evaluations, whether consciously or not” by comparing the organization to a standard or some type of criteria (p. 880). Then in 2011, Tost developed a model to account for stakeholders as evaluators. The model entails three phases: judgement formation, judgement use, and judgement reassessment. Every stakeholder makes an initial legitimacy judgement of an organization. Utilizing Deephouse et al.’s (2017) legitimacy evaluation tiers, the stakeholder will credit the organization as having either accepted, proper, debated, or illegitimate legitimacy. Both Tost (2011) and Deephouse et al. (2017) noted that many legitimacy evaluations are by very nature passive, but they are still occurring subconsciously by the stakeholder. Once an initial legitimacy judgement is made, the stakeholder will act accordingly until an occurrence

triggers the need for a reevaluation of the organization's legitimacy, thus restarting the evaluation process (Tost, 2011, p. 699).

Stakeholders commonly consist of a wide range of individuals and groups. These disparate stakeholders often evaluate an organization's legitimacy differently from one another by using different standards or cultural norms to evaluate and determine legitimacy. In higher education, for example, a dean will likely evaluate the legitimacy of the online offerings using different standards than an individual faculty member teaching the courses. However, both individuals are stakeholders and are vitally important to the expansion or survival of the institution. Additionally, as stakeholders vary, the type of legitimacy (e.g., pragmatic, normative, or cognitive) they confer will likely be different. For example, a department head will likely accord pragmatic legitimacy to online offerings, as it is both in the university's and her own self-interest for online offerings to excel; whereas a director of educational equity who values online offerings for their ability to increase student equity and access would likely confer legitimacy that is more normative in nature.

Stakeholders vary depending on the organizational field, location, and circumstances, but their support remains essential to the survival of the organization. Interestingly and certainly applicable to online higher education, Scott (1995) explains the difficulty experienced by institutions that must confront "conflicting demands and standards" from a variety of stakeholders (p. 46). In attempting to secure the support of a stakeholder, an institution may find that it has undermined the support of other significant groups or individuals. Meyer and Scott (1983) argued that "the legitimacy of a given organization is negatively affected by the number of different authorities sovereign over it" and further damaged by increased variety and contradictions among constituencies conferring legitimacy (p. 202). To this end, a "completely

legitimate organization would be one about which no question could be raised” by any stakeholder as each decision and function is aligned with the encompassing culture (Meyer & Scott, 1983, p. 201).

Considering the shared governance structure of most higher education institutions, the immense alumni networks, all federal and state regulating entities, accrediting bodies, employers of graduates, community partners, and professional alliances, the identifiable stakeholders of any one higher education institution with online offerings is a vast and diverse group. However, accounting for stakeholder support provides insight to an organization’s legitimacy, and specifically whether any efforts of the organization (i.e., higher education institution’s use of online offerings) are perceived by stakeholders as proper or appropriate endeavors.

### *Sharing Legitimacy*

In approximately 20 years, online higher education rose from an excluded existence within the ostracized for-profit sector of higher education to formal acceptance as a critical operation within prestigious, regionally-accredited universities (Carey, 2019; Seaman et al., 2018; Winston, 1999). However, as previously discussed, there are many who still do not view online education as a legitimate equivalent to that of face-to-face instruction. Considering that legitimacy is gained from supportive stakeholders, a prudent question worth addressing is how the debated concept of online education became mainstream? To this end, an institutional theory perspective that applies literature on legitimacy borrowing and discursive narratives, allows for a better understanding of current perceptions of online higher education.

Researchers have argued that it is much easier for an organization to maintain or extend its legitimacy than for an organization to gain or accrue net new legitimacy (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Patriotta et al., 2011; Powell & DiMaggio, 1991). An organization that is already

legitimate in some capacity can leverage its legitimacy to pursue actions deemed outside the organization's norms. However, a nascent organization lacks both the legitimacy and leverage to pursue endeavors outside of what culture considers appropriate. Ignoring cultural norms to enact these behaviors would greatly increase the likelihood that a new organization will fail.

Understanding increases in organizational legitimacy through successful legitimacy leveraging and maintenance, as well as true legitimacy gains by nascent organizations offers much needed context to understanding the perceptions of online offerings that exist throughout higher education institutions.

Legitimacy borrowing refers to an illegitimate venture or entity's reliance on a legitimate organization for survival. Through an agreement or relationship, the illegitimate entity receives legitimacy from the legitimate organization that the illegitimate entity was previously unable to obtain independently (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 349). Often, illegitimate entities are viewed as such because potential stakeholders perceive them as altering from cultural norms, too inexperienced and unproven, or simply not aligning with their held values or interests. Through a connection with a legitimate organization, the legitimacy afforded to the legitimate organization can be extended to the illegitimate partner (Mattingly & Westover, 2015). Singh, Tucker, and House (1986) found that the ability of an illegitimate organization to obtain extended legitimacy is critical to overcoming its liability of newness and to eventually develop into an independently-legitimate organization (Freeman et al., 1983; Stinchcombe, 1965).

While legitimacy sharing certainly occurs between two distinct organizations, it is also common practice within a single organization that is launching a new sector that does not fit within the cultural norm confines in which the organization exists. Essentially, a legitimate organization utilizes its "established record" and stockpile of legitimacy to credit pursuits that

may be off-putting or unaligned with stakeholders' values (Bernstein, 1992; Suchman, 1995, p. 588). When this occurs, to protect the organization from declining legitimacy or wavering stakeholder support, the organization must decouple the goals, purpose, and operations of the larger organization from that of the new sector, or at least appear to do so in the eyes of the organization's stakeholders (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This decoupling allows the core of the organization to remain unchanged even though new and possibly even radical identity-changing pursuits are occurring in the new sector. Additionally, the decoupling signals to essential stakeholders that the values and mission of the organization are unchanged, as is the rationale for stakeholders to continue affording legitimacy to the organization (Zucker, 1983, p. 25).

While the potential of online offerings was desirable for many higher education administrators, the common associations with diploma mills and for-profit institutions was viewed as detrimental (Hara & Kling, 1999; Morey, 2004; Soley, 1998). As a result, new, connected, but separate entities were formed at several traditionally brick-and-mortar institutions to pursue online offerings. By separating these pursuits from regular operations and behaviors of the brick-and-mortar institution, the institution's support from stakeholders and the organization's legitimacy was largely unscathed. Importantly, in isolation, these pursuits would fall outside cultural norms for respectable institutions of higher education and as such deter potential stakeholders, limit legitimacy accrual, and likely result in the eventual failure of the venture (Cravener, 1999; Reid, 1959; Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009). However, through the venture's connection with its "parent" organization, legitimacy was secured, and these newly-formed extensions were able to develop outside the constraints of cultural norms (Mattingly & Westover, 2015).

The concept of legitimacy sharing provides insight to how online offerings are positioned within in a higher education sector previously dominated by face-to-face instruction. However, legitimacy sharing does not account for how stakeholders make sense of or even wrestle with the seemingly misalignment of online offerings to institutional norms or to the widely accepted legitimate activities of the institution. This dissertation seeks to add to the literature by detailing how different roles within higher education institutions perceive of online offerings when legitimacy sharing occurs.

### ***Cultural Entrepreneurship***

Conversely, there are several online higher education trailblazers that emerged without receiving external legitimacy through a relationship with another institution, that closely embody entrepreneurial endeavors. These nascent organizations lacked the legitimacy required to survive and as a result appealed to key institutional stakeholders to garner support for the venture. A strategy employed by these institutional actors is the use of cultural entrepreneurship in the form of discursive narratives (Garud et al., 2014, 2019; Kane, 1997). Once established, discursive narratives can help shape perceptions regardless of whether the narratives are closely aligned to reality. Understanding how discursive narratives are used to garner stakeholder support will provide context to how stakeholders make sense of and perceive online offerings.

First, it may be helpful to briefly expound on the distinctiveness of the entrepreneur experience. Aldrich and Fiol (1994) explain that entrepreneurs are “navigating, at best, in an institutional vacuum of indifferent munificence and, at worst, in a hostile environment impervious to individual action” (p. 645). While subject to the normal burdens associated with creating a new organization, entrepreneurs must also “carve out a new market, raise capital from skeptical sources...and cope with other difficulties stemming from their nascent status” (Aldrich



& Fiol, 1994, p. 645). Additionally, Stinchcombe's (1965) "liability of newness," highlights various factors challenging nascent organizations, which institutional actors must overcome in order to survive. Typically, stakeholders may be wary of new organizations, especially new types of organizations. They may not understand the organization's goals or its mission, or stakeholders may not perceive the organization as appropriately aligned with culture or self-interests (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; D. Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Low & Abrahamson, 1997).

Lounsbury and Glynn (2001) defined cultural entrepreneurship as the "process of meaning-making in which entrepreneurs, in order to rationalize and legitimize their new ventures, construct identity stories that mediate between extant stocks of resources, both institutionally shared and idiosyncratic, and capital acquisition and wealth creation" (p. 546; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). Since new types of nascent organizations likely have little established credibility, entrepreneurs can utilize story-telling or narratives to "explain, rationalize, and promote a new venture" to stakeholders who may have been previously unwilling to support the venture due to its newness (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, p. 546; Stinchcombe, 1965). By identifying cultural symbols relevant to stakeholders and to the nascent organization, entrepreneurs are seen as "skilled cultural operatives" (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, p. 559) using stories specifically catered to stakeholders to illustrate a "favorable interpretation" (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001, p. 546) of the organization's potential (Bartel & Garud, 2009).

To this end, cultural entrepreneurs view culture as a "toolkit" (Swidler, 1986) filled with numerous cultural symbols to utilize in order to form an organizational identity that connects and appeals to resource-laden stakeholders (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Navis & Glynn, 2010).

However, as previously discussed, the views and sentiments of stakeholders vary from stakeholder to stakeholder, and nascent organizations must rely on resources from numerous groups and individuals to increase chances of survival (Hanlon & Saunders, 2007). Therefore, cultural entrepreneurs are ineffective if they attempt to utilize the same cultural symbols across a wide range of stakeholders who have varying levels of connection to the selected symbol. To increase effectiveness, cultural entrepreneurs must understand the diversity of their stakeholders and strategically cater narratives to appeal to select audiences (Bitektine, 2011; Suchman, 1995).

As suggested, within online higher education these narratives are as varied as the group of potential stakeholders being targeted for their support. For example, narratives used to appeal to faculty would not be appropriate to use toward students or the administration and vice versa (Hanlon & Saunders, 2007). One tactic is to draw on the flexibility of online higher education to acquire stakeholder support. Karber (2001) detailed how online programs present themselves as the feasible solution for full-time working students and for students with families, and Deal III (2002) showed how online higher education appeals to students and instructors who were physically located far from brick and mortar schools. A different approach is to focus on the potential increase in revenue from online higher education. At a time when state governments are cutting higher education budgets and institutional leaders face decisions to increase tuition rates, online education is an increasingly appealing endeavor. Perceptions of online offerings are likely influenced by a variety of discursive narratives, however, to what extent they shape and influence perceptions is much less understood.

### **Academic Capitalism**

As organizational legitimacy theory aids in detailing the intricacies that higher education institutions have successfully navigated to expand their efforts from the physical classroom to

the virtual one, academic capitalism theory focuses on the enrollment and revenue growth potential of online offerings and argues that universities are inherently linked with markets (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic capitalism positions universities “squarely in the marketplace and views the work of universities as commercial” (Silberman, 2020, p. 32).

Universities regularly endeavor to secure external revenue and then utilize the revenue to invest in new knowledge and technology to better position them to engage in the market (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Foundational to this theory is the concept that universities have shifted away from viewing education as a public good and have replaced it with a capitalistic perspective that views education as a private good to be bought and sold (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Academic capitalism not only positions the “work of universities as commercial,” it also places institutions in competition with each other to attract student consumers (Silberman, 2020, p. 32; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). In using the term capitalism, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) reveal the connection between higher education institutions and economic systems. University actors, such as “faculty, students, administrators, and academic professionals” are also entrenched in the marketplace, and use a “variety of...resources to create new circuits of knowledge that link higher education institutions to the new economy” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 1).

Importantly, while academic capitalism views students as consumers, a crucial component of the theory is that “it views the institution as the marketer” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 1).

Institutions employ renown faculty, offer in-demand programs of study, invest in campus improvement, athletics, and student services in order to market to and successfully recruit the most desired prospective students, who when admitted, increase the institution’s selectivity and prestige, which is then used to market to and recruit the next generation of students (Münch, 2014).

However, in order for institutions to thrive in this market, it is essential that they obtain external revenue. External revenue allows for institutions to hire the best faculty to teach the in-demand programs, which attract desirable students. External revenue is also necessary to invest in athletics, campus improvement projects, and the various student services that prospective students now expect (Münch, 2014). Consequently, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue that functions and resources of colleges and universities are “market-driven” and seek to “create the opportunity for institutions to commercialize and generate external revenue” (Silberman, 2020, p. 33). These endeavors provide context to the higher education economy that is no longer primarily concerned with providing education as a public good, but is now viewed as a privatized good, that is bought and sold in the marketplace (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Since one of the commonly cited benefits of online offerings is increased revenue, academic capitalism is useful in accounting for the actions of colleges and universities that appear more business-like than educationally oriented. Ortagus and Tanner (2019) aptly argue a similar point: “Although revenue may not be the sole motivator for increasing online enrollment, it can be one factor for decisions to recruit online students and expand an institution’s relative market share through online education” (p. 55). While students and their subsequent tuition dollars are necessities for higher education institutions, academic capitalism explains this relationship from a market perspective, where colleges and universities privatize knowledge to student consumers (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

To this end, online offerings are utilized to generate new revenue streams, which are then used to build the finest facilities, attract renowned faculty, and recruit the brightest students (Bok, 2009). Therefore, the money-generating potential of online education should not be overlooked when trying to ascertain how higher education personnel perceive the purpose of

online offerings. In fact, Slaughter and Leslie (1997) argue that “capitalism...is defined as an economic system in which allocation decisions are driven by market forces.” (p. 9). Academic capitalism explains perceptions and subsequent decision-making in direct relation to market forces and through their ability to generate external revenue.

As higher education institutions view participation within the online environment as a necessity for future institutional survival (Allen & Seaman, 2007, 2013; Seaman et al., 2018), and attempt to rationalize online course formats as avenues toward helping new student populations obtain their educational goals (Deal III, 2002; Karber, 2001), academic capitalism theory provides insight to these changes that accounts for the highly sought after revenue from online offerings and the increasing commercialization of higher education.

### **Summary**

Over the past twenty years, online education has emerged from the peripheries and into the mainstream of respectable higher education (Haynes, 2017; Seaman et al., 2018). Technological advances of the last two decades have drastically altered distance education and have allowed for online education to emerge (Simonson & Schlosser, 2009; Sun & Chen, 2016). As a result, the majority of institutions now view online education as critical to their long-term strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2013, p. 4). As institutions increased their focus on and utilization of online offerings, research sought to evaluate the quality of online education by comparing it to the only other widely practiced and accepted mode of college learning: face-to-face instruction. While there is no shortage of research that details the shortcomings of online offerings (Bolliger et al., 2019; Cravener, 1999; Edmundson, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2001; Peters, 2002; Roberto & Johnson, 2019; Terras et al., 2018; Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009), there is also ample research that highlights many of its benefits (Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Deal III, 2002; Karber,

2001; Mupinga, 2005; Sadykova & Dautermann, 2019; Sheail, 2018). One commonly cited benefit of note is the access to new revenue streams provided by online offerings (Nagel, 2021; Ortagus & Yang, 2018; Singh & Pan, 2004). While these benefits are well documented, how these benefits and a myriad of other factors influence perceptions of online offerings and any subsequent decisions impacting online offerings is not understood.

The connection between perception and decision making is quite significant to this research. The concepts of bounded rationality (March & Simon, 1958; Simon, 1947) and the behavioral theory of the firm (Cyert & March, 1963) provide a crucial foundation for understanding the organizational decision-making process. Additionally, these concepts can be applied to decision making within higher education institutions that rely on a shared governance model. However, decision making in higher education institutions is commonly complex and too often inefficient. The garbage can model (Cohen & March, 1974) proves particularly suitable for understanding the complexities and navigating the higher education decision-making process.

For this research, I utilized a theoretical framework that incorporates both legitimacy theory and academic capitalism theory to understand perceptions of online offerings and the factors influencing their perceptions that exist across a higher education institution. Legitimacy theory explains perceptions in terms of alignment to cultural norms or the degree that something is proper (Suchman, 1995), whereas academic capitalism explains higher education institutions' actions as being market driven (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). While the documented benefits of online education span from increasing student access and diversity to obtaining new revenue streams, legitimacy theory and academic capitalism theory are utilized to understand what factors influence and shape these perceptions. Through identifying how different roles in higher education view the purpose of online offerings at their respective institutions, the current online

experience can be better understood and serve as a crucial input to efforts that seek to improve the experience.

### **Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology**

Through this research, I attempt to contribute to our understanding of how different higher education personnel view the purpose of online offerings. In addition, this dissertation seeks to understand what higher education decision makers see as the legitimate functions of their institution, how these views differ across personnel types, and ultimately how they shape perceptions of online offerings.

This chapter provides an overview of the design and methods utilized in this study. First, the research questions are restated to position the design and methods. Second, a qualitative instrumental case study approach is introduced. Third, a positionality reflection is presented to further rationalize the research approach. Finally, the specific research methods employed in this study are reviewed, including the selection of the site, participant descriptions, sampling method, data collection, data analysis, and a discussion regarding reliability.

#### **Research Questions**

Three research questions guided this study: (1) How do online higher education decision makers perceive the purpose of online offerings? (2) What major factors influence online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings? (3) How do online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types? These questions are examined through a qualitative single case study.

#### **Qualitative Approach**

Utilizing a qualitative methods approach to examine my research questions is appropriate as “qualitative data, with their emphasis on people’s lived experiences, are fundamentally well suited to locating the meaning people place on events, processes, and structures of their lives and for connecting these meaning to the social world around them” (Miles et al., 2020, p. 11).



Additionally, a qualitative study is useful in accounting for complexities of a content-specific setting while also allowing for flexibility and discernment regarding what receives focus and what is examined (Edmondson & McManus, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994). A qualitative approach is also useful to answer questions like the ones included in this research, which focus on understanding how meaning is constructed and are less concerned with developing hypotheses and experiments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

I utilize an interpretive lens for its emphasis on understanding “naturally occurring, ordinary events in natural settings” to account for the “real life” events that contribute to perceptions of online offerings (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10). The constructivist philosophical paradigm further supports the interpretivist lens. Following Guba and Lincoln (1994), the constructivist approach heavily accounts for and documents the researcher’s positionality throughout the research process and assumes that the researcher and the participants are linked and influenced through their interactions. Knowledge is created, shaped, and understood through these interactions, which increases the importance of documenting the researcher’s positionality. Furthermore, Snape and Spencer (2003), argue that the researcher and the social world certainly impact one another and that interactions between the two are greatly influenced by views and beliefs of the researcher. Arguably, this impact and influence extends beyond any isolated interaction and certainly into the analysis of data and its interpretation. In alignment with a constructivist approach, I provide a concept map below to document how my knowledge and experiences are inextricably connected to the research process and influenced my interpretation of online higher education personnel’s perceptions of online offerings.

## Case Study

I use a case study methodology to examine a single instrumental case of online higher education personnel's perceptions of online offerings. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that "in a single instrumental case, the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (p. 98). Stake (1995) posits that instrumental case studies are useful to provide "general understanding" to the research questions through examining the case (p. 3). Willis (2007) argues that case studies focus on specific contexts in order to understand people and their real situations. While there is not one consistent definition or shared approach to case study (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003, 2009), boundedness of some unit or object is most often what defines a case, and researchers utilize case studies to produce insight into and from a specific context. Additionally, case studies leverage thick descriptive data, use inductive reasoning to uncover meaning, and produce understanding to the phenomenon being examined (Willis, 2007).

To align my epistemology and methodology, I utilize Stake's (1995) approach to case study. Stake (1995) argues that "most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered," which supports a constructivist paradigm (p. 100). As such, researchers serve as interpreters of reality and collectors of interpretations of reality (Stake, 1995; Yazan, 2015). Agreeing with the notion that a case is bounded, Stake (1995) adds that a case is "a specific, a complex, functioning thing" with "a boundary and working parts," which can be most beneficial in studying people and programs (p. 2). Additionally, Stake (1995) describes four central characteristics of case studies: they are "holistic," "empirical," "interpretive," and "emphatic." Holistic means that the phenomenon being examined cannot be understood apart from the context in which it exists. Yazan (2015) describes this as the

phenomenon and the case being inseparable from each other. Empirical pertains to the study being centered on observations and experiences. Interpretive strongly aligns with the constructivist paradigm in that the role of the researcher is to interpret reality. Lastly, Stake (1995) views case studies as emphatic, meaning that researchers strive to accurately understand and interpret subjects' experiences and their perspectives.

Stake's (1995) approach is suitable for examining online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings. As an instrumental study, meaning that while I attempt to provide a rich account of the case, the central purpose is to "provide insight into an issue" (Stake, 1995, p. 237) and potentially make a theoretical contribution. As such, I begin with the issue of how online higher education decision makers perceive of online offerings. Starting with this issue, a case can then be selected and examined to provide context and understanding to the issue. The selected case is of less importance than the underlying issue, but it provides context to the issue and the purpose of the study. Importantly, however, in following Stake's (1995) approach, the case is viewed as holistic. Meaning that how online higher education decision makers perceive of online offerings cannot be separated from the environment or context in which their perceptions exist. Furthermore, in following Stake (1995), the study should also be empirical and interpretive. Through observations and interview experiences, data are gathered and interpreted by the researcher to construct knowledge. This knowledge informs and provides context to the underlying issue, but any findings should not be generalized beyond the circumstances of the case.

### **Researcher Positionality**

A qualitative case study utilizing Stake's (1995) approach, places the researcher in an active and involved role throughout the study. The researcher shapes the study prior to

interacting with participants, during data collection, and through data analysis. The researcher develops the underlying issue statement, selects the case, determines the participants, and is involved in all interactions with the participants. Furthermore, the researcher must then strive to accurately interpret data to ensure participants' perspectives remain emic. The researcher's goal is to produce knowledge that is constructed by the researcher and the participants of the study (Stake, 1995, p. 37). As such, the role of the researcher is crucial, and an accounting of the researcher's positionality is prudent.

I fulfill three distinct roles regarding online higher education: that of a higher education doctoral student and researcher; as an online faculty member, and as an administrative professional working in online higher education. Each of these roles have certainly shaped my views and perception of online education and undoubtedly influence my research approach, interaction with participants, and data analysis. As such, documenting my positionality is an important step to understanding personal biases and limiting their influence on the findings of this study.

I have enrolled in online courses at four different higher education institutions throughout my undergraduate and graduate studies. As a student, I view online courses as a way to add flexibility to my schedule. Not having to attend a class at a set time or physical location helps to reduce the amount of time I need to commit to courses. I have experienced online courses that were poorly designed, with very limited faculty interaction, which ultimately left me feeling like I was both the teacher and the student. However, I have also enrolled in online courses that were quite engaging. These courses fostered student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions, while also maintaining the added flexibility that accompanies most online courses. I have previously researched student and faculty perceptions of online courses and have conducted a

pilot study as part of a graduate course to better understand these perceptions. Ultimately, through my experiences as a student, I typically view online courses as more flexible, less rigorous, and less engaging than face-to-face courses. While some online courses succeed in fostering student engagement and student interactions with faculty and other students, my experiences leave me feeling that this engagement is less than what I have typically experienced in face-to-face residential courses.

However, on occasion the isolation that I have felt as an online student was sometimes interpreted as a more challenging or rigorous experience than that of the same course offered residentially. For example, I first attempted to take a statistics course online and I struggled to understand the concepts and eventually withdrew from the course. I remember feeling alone and responsible for teaching myself the content. As the course continued, the concepts became more complex, and I realized taking the course online was a mistake. I felt the need to ask questions and seek clarification, but the online experience made it difficult to do so. The following year, I enrolled in a residential version of the same course and earned an A. I asked questions, learned from hearing answers to my classmates' questions, and formed a relationship with my professor. Many of the challenges I experienced in the online version of the course were mitigated in the face-to-face course. While the difficulties of my online experience could be described as one that lacked engagement, it was the lack of engagement that made the experience more difficult and ultimately a more challenging and rigorous experience.

As an online faculty member, I have over a decade of teaching experience and have taught courses at two different institutions: a private non-profit university and a community college. My first experience teaching online was as a graduate assistant. Interactions between myself and students occur via email, phone calls, discussion boards, and various video

conferencing platforms, like Skype and Zoom. However, most interactions occur through email. The majority of students who have enrolled in my online courses are non-traditional college students, meaning that they are either adult learners or high school students taking college courses through a dual enrollment program. As faculty, I have become increasingly aware of the financial implications of online offerings. For example, at the institutions where I have taught, course sections with less than 15 students are canceled and the students are spread among other sections to maximize enrollments in courses and minimize expenses (i.e., paying fewer instructors). Course sections can have up to 30 students, but sections average around 23 students. Additionally, in my experience, the majority of faculty who teach online are adjunct or part-time. The economic scalability of online offerings is apparent to me as a faculty member. While I would argue that desired learning outcomes are achieved in both online and face-to-face instruction, student engagement, faculty engagement, and the potential to enhance student development in online courses trails behind that of face-to-face instruction.

Still, my desire as a faculty member is to educate students and ultimately see my students grasp concepts and make applications based on what they have learned. I am aware of the revenue generating potential of online courses and I am occasionally impacted by decisions to maximize revenues, but these decisions have very little influence on how I approach the courses I teach.

The most prominent preconceived notions that shape my perspective of online offerings comes from my professional experience working in online higher education administration. I have worked in online higher education since 2011, and during this time I have held a variety of positions at a private non-profit university, a community college, and an R1 state flagship institution. These experiences have led me to believe that many of the systems and processes

influencing online education are business oriented, yet individual sentiments are still present and are often more closely aligned with the educational mission of the institution.

As an administrator, I have witnessed many business-oriented decisions based on revenue, enrollment, and application numbers. I have seen long-term and full-time contracted faculty laid-off as course sections were moved online to be taught by adjunct faculty. I have been involved in countless strategy meetings focused of increasing revenue and student enrollment, and significantly fewer meetings focused on increasing student success. Student retention is discussed often because institutions do care whether their students graduate. However, there is also the reality of the cost to acquire new students and how from a financial perspective retaining students is cheaper than acquiring new ones.

I have also witnessed how revenues from online offerings are utilized. Often, net revenues from online offerings are dispersed and spent on other initiatives across the institution instead of being reinvested into online offerings or used to lower tuition costs. While, I have seen large financial investments designed to improve the online experience and increase student success, these investments are geared toward competing in the ever-growing competitive online marketplace or they are designed to increase applications and student retention, which again is linked to the financial generating potential of online offerings.

I recognize the needed pragmatism in higher education; institutions need students and their money to exist. With that said, my experiences and interactions have led me to believe that the individual sentiments of those working in higher education are much more student and mission oriented than many of the systems that exist within these institutions.

It is fairly common knowledge that many individuals who work in higher education could earn higher salaries in a different industry. While faculty may hold appointments that provide

time off during the summer months, staff work year-round. Still, staff choose to work in higher education. My experiences have led me to believe that many enjoy being a part of the campus community and most feel a sense of purpose in their work. I do not believe that many higher education staff think of their role in terms of revenue generation or cost reduction. Instead, I believe staff think of themselves as serving students and faculty or in a way that is contributing to achieving the educational mission of the institution.

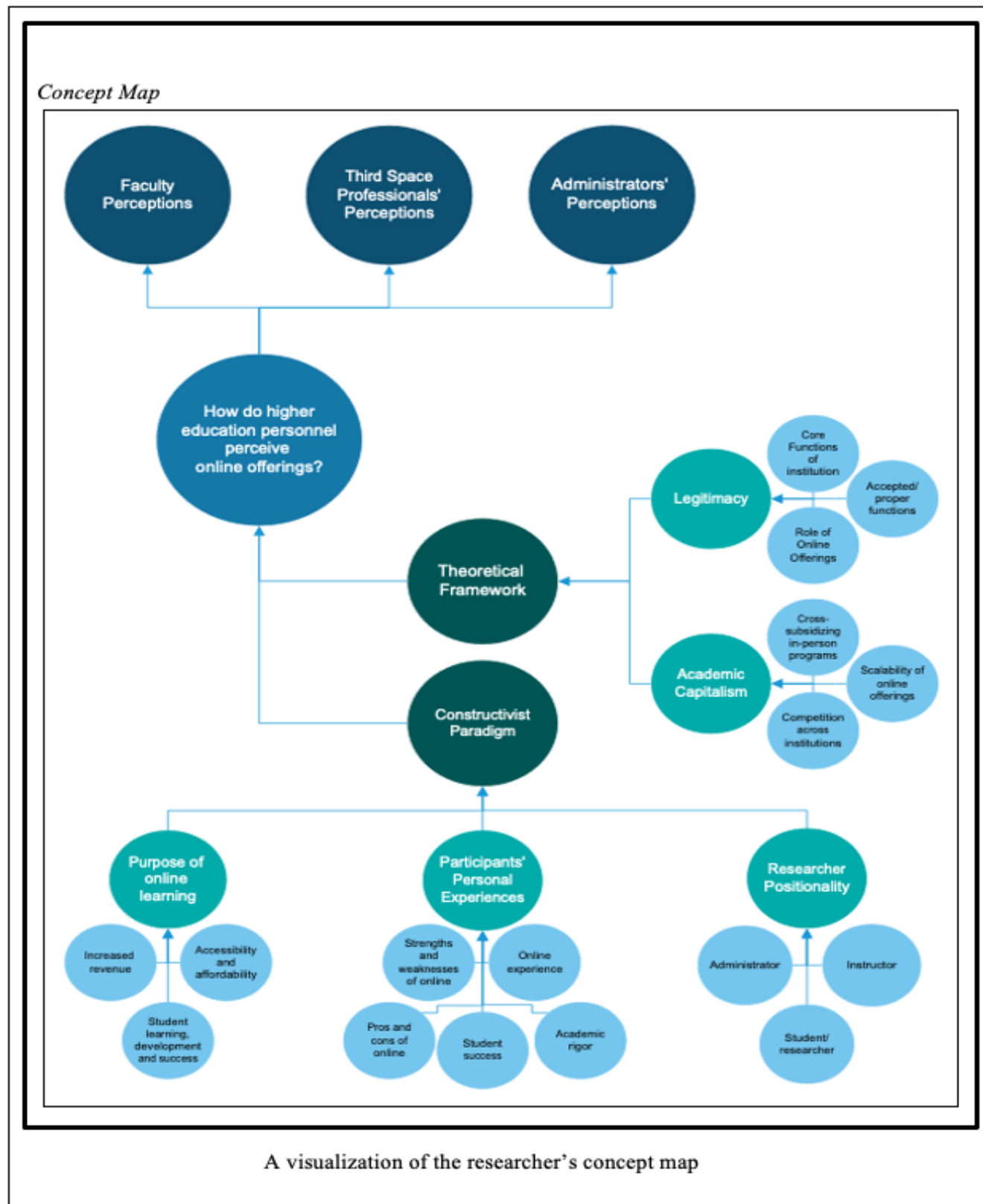
My experiences have shaped me as an individual and as a researcher. While my experiences are not the focus of this research, I utilize a constructivist approach that constructs knowledge through experiences and interactions. Any preconceived notion of online learning or prior knowledge of online learning shapes the construction of this knowledge. Figure 1 contains a concept map that portrays my positionality, theory, and my approach to construct knowledge through this research. While the map is not exhaustive, it serves as a visualization of my approach to make sense of perceptions of online offerings.

### **Site Location**

This study was conducted at the flagship campus of Big State University (BSU), which is located in a predominately rural area in the northeastern United States. BSU is a large R1 university with various campus locations, offering both residential and fully online programs. According to their website, BSU enrolls students at the undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral levels and has above-average enrollments for a research university. Two-thirds of BSU's enrollments come from in-state students, however, close to 60% of online enrollments come from out of state students. Over the last 15 years, BSU's online enrollments have significantly increased from a mere 2.9% of the total enrollments in 2006, to 16.5% in 2021. While online enrollments have increased 13.6% over the past 15 years, BSU's total enrollments have only



Figure 1



increased 7.3% during the same span of time. BSU's size and commitment to public education, along with its online enrollment growth in recent years makes it a desirable site location for the purpose of this study.

Additionally, BSU's student demographic data further supports its selection for this research. Based on available student demographic data, the answer to if online offerings increase student access is somewhat ambiguous. Over two-thirds of BSU's online students enroll part-time, whereas over 90% of BSU's residential students enroll as full-time students. While these statistics only examine students' credit loads, the perception that online education may increase student access among populations who cannot enroll full time should be noted. Conversely, however, in examining student demographic data available on BSU's website, there does not appear to be a significant difference between online and residential enrollment in terms of student race or ethnicity. Additionally, first generation students tend to enroll more in BSU's residential programs (22%) compared to their fully online programs (13%), and BSU's international students also tend to enroll in more residential programs, making up 11% of residential enrollments and only 6% of online enrollments. While these statistics provide a limited view of how online offerings are utilized at BSU, they appear to at least somewhat challenge the notion of increased student access and therefore make BSU a desirable site to examine perceptions of online offerings.

Furthermore, the listed tuition price of attending BSU may possibly challenge the notion that online offerings increase student access. BSU's online tuition is approximately \$650 per credit, which is nearly double the cost per credit of several online programs offered by other regionally accredited institutions. While the listed tuition price provides additional context to

how participants perceive of BSU online offerings, it also adds further ambiguity to whether BSU's online offerings are used to increase student access.

While BSU's online offerings are offered to students regardless of students' physical location, most of the administrative and student services offices that support and manage BSU's online offerings are located at BSU's flagship campus. Additionally, many faculty with direct involvement in teaching, managing, and general decision-making pertaining to online offerings are located at BSU's flagship campus. This site provides access to participants from all three personnel roles (e.g., administration, tenure track faculty who teach online, and third space professionals), which further supports the site selection for this study.

### **Participants**

Participants for this study were identified based on their decision-making responsibilities pertaining to managing, teaching, and/or influencing online offerings. In order to determine if and how perceptions of online offerings vary by position, each participant was classified into one of the following personnel roles: administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, or third space professional (Whitchurch, 2012). As each of these roles are vague and can encompass considerable variation, the following sections provide additional context to each role and how these roles are more narrowly defined for the purpose of participant selection. Importantly, some participants may overlap multiple personnel roles. For example, just as I teach online and work as an administrator, participants may also fill more than one personnel role. When this occurred, I sought to understand the participant's perceptions and determine if their perceptions are primarily influenced by one of the roles they fill. If a primary role could not be determined, I did not attempt to group the participant's perceptions into one of the personnel roles and instead removed the participant from the study.

### ***Administration***

The administration is responsible for setting and attaining goals, and for clearly coordinating and communicating the components of the academic community (*Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities*, 2006). Desirable participants for the administration personnel type are individuals responsible for managing and allocating resources for online offerings or for services that support online offerings. These participants hold full-time, non-academic positions, and fulfill roles such as vice president, vice provost, dean, executive director, and members of their staffs. Importantly, participants under the administration personnel type do not teach or do research as part of their full-time duties. These individuals plan, oversee enrollments, manage budgets, and incorporate strategies to manage and enhance programs.

### ***Tenure-track Faculty who Teach Online***

For the purposes of this study, the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel type includes individuals who are predominately focused on research and/or teaching, have full-time academic appointments, hold professor positions, and who have experience teaching both online and in face-to-face formats. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of the research that examines perceptions of online offerings does so through a comparison with face-to-face instruction. To account for and build upon this research, participants in this personnel group were limited to individuals with experience teaching both online and in residential formats. While this criterion limits faculty participants and likely also the perceptions documented through this research, it positions faculty perceptions closer to much of the research that defines and explains online offerings through a comparison with face-to-face offerings.

Furthermore, the tenure-track faculty who teach online group were limited to faculty who primarily teach or conduct research. Participants who hold academic appointments who are also responsible for administrative duties beyond teaching and research were grouped under the third space professional role. Importantly, this distinction is to highlight and accurately categorize the experiences of participants. As such, for the purposes of this research, faculty who hold positions such as program coordinator, program head, or program/department chair fill positions that span across academia and administration and therefore were categorized as third space professionals.

Since this research is interested in examining decision makers' perceptions, participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel group were limited to individuals who routinely make decisions that influence or shape online offerings. As such, participants in this group are full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty. While this approach is appropriate for the purposes of this study, it is worth noting the growing role that adjunct and part-time faculty have in teaching online offerings (Lima, 2018; Norman et al., 2020; Ruth, 2018). While outside the scope of this dissertation, further research that explores adjunct and part-time faculty perceptions of online offerings and how those perceptions may differ from the perceptions captured in this study, is certainly an interesting topic worth examining.

### ***Third Space Professionals***

Third space professionals are arguably the most non-specific of the personnel roles. These individuals are full-time employees whose responsibilities span across both administrative and academic functions. Individuals who hold positions such as program coordinators and enrollment performance professionals, who are tasked with the on-going success of online offerings are of particular interest. Often, these individuals hold academic positions and have assumed additional administrative responsibilities regarding online offerings, such as a degree

program chair or online program coordinator. However, third space professionals may also be full-time administrative personnel who partner closely with academic programs and oversee things such as applications, enrollments, course sections, course offerings, and course design. Again, decision-making authority regarding online offerings is a critical component of this role. Due to their unique position that spans across academia and administration, third space professionals of online offerings have the potential to significantly influence the future of online education.

### **Sampling Method**

According to Stake (1995), sampling occurs when selecting the case and in selecting the data sources “that best help us understand the case” (p. 56). To ensure that the case is appropriate for examining the underlying research issue (Stake, 1995), purposive sampling was utilized to select both the case and the data sources within the case. Patton’s (2015) following description helps outline the benefits of utilizing purposive sampling within case study. “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry...Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding” (Patton, 2015, p. 264).

Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research and is commonly used in case study, however, an explanation of what purposive means in this specific context is necessary. As my research focuses on understanding online higher education decision makers’ perceptions of online offerings, it was necessary to ensure the participants included in this study meet the criteria that I have outlined in the preceding sections. Therefore, through purposive sampling, the research sample consists of individuals that fall into one of the three personnel roles:

administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, or third space professional, all of whom have some degree of decision-making authority regarding online offerings.

In addition to meeting the above criteria, ensuring sufficient representation from each of the three personnel types is also important. I included 4 participants for each personnel type. Participants were recruited through emails, word of mouth, and snowball sampling. Snowball sampling utilizes connections with identified participants to assist in the recruitment of additional participants (Noy, 2008). Once I confirmed that an individual met the criteria for the study and was willing to participate, I asked if they knew additional individuals who meet the criteria and may be interested in participating in the study. Importantly, purposive sampling was used to ensure participants met the criteria of the study and for each personnel group. However, snowball sampling was used as an initial recruitment effort to identify possible participants. In the event an individual was identified through snowball sampling who did not meet the criteria for the study, they were not included in the participant list or in the study.

### **Data Collection**

As is consistent with case study design (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003), the primary data source for this study is in-depth semi-structured interviews. Additionally, document analysis and direct observation of participants supplement interview data. Data collection occurred between June 2022 and December 2022. Interviews occurred in-person if participants agreed to meet and were comfortable meeting in person. Due to social distancing guidelines because of COVID-19, interviews were also conducted using teleconferencing technology, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Interviews were recorded with permission from each participant, and I used pseudonyms for each participant to protect and ensure participants' anonymity.

Each semi-structured interview ranged from 40 to 75 minutes and utilized an interview protocol. To increase participants' comfort, I strived to create a relatively casual atmosphere and interviews were more conversational than scripted in nature. The semi-structured approach allowed for flexibility throughout the interview. While the interview protocol included both general issue questions and much more specific questions, I had the freedom to ask additional questions and/or seek clarification when needed. Following the constructivist approach, my role throughout the interview process was an active one. Not every question on the protocol needed to be asked of each participant and some questions were only asked depending on responses by participants and the nature of the interview.

Each interview recording was transcribed within 24 hours of the actual interview. I conducted each interview and was solely responsible for transcribing each interview via Microsoft Word. Additionally, each interview transcript included an Interview Summary section. This section provides easy access to the information regarding the interview as well as summary and observational data collected immediately following the interview. Furthermore, the Interview Summary section includes notes on the following: relevant background details associated with the interview; a brief overview of the interview; the significance or importance of the interview; and thoughts on where this interview may lead. Importantly, interview transcription and the Interview Summary section were completed within 24 hours of conducting the interview to enhance my recall of the interview and accuracy of my notes.

After the interviews were complete, transcribed, and analyzed, I utilized a form of member checking by sharing summary level data with each participant. The summary highlights major themes and includes several direct quotes and paraphrased sections that I planned to use in



this study's findings. This form of member checking provided each participant an opportunity to clarify or expound on their statements from the interview.

### **Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol was created based on the research questions and literature regarding perceptions of online education, experiences with online education, decision making, and legitimacy. The interview protocol includes many open-ended questions and several statement responses and was designed to last between 40 and 75 minutes depending on the length of responses from participants. For semi-structured interviews, the interview protocol serves as a guide. Additional questions or follow-up questions were asked depending on participant's responses. For a complete copy of the interview protocol, see Appendix A.

The interview protocol is divided into five main sections. Section A seeks to understand participants' current role or position at BSU and what their involvement is with online offerings. Additionally, this section attempts to understand participants' decision-making role and what factors influence participants decision making. Section B focuses on understanding participants' perspectives of online offerings. This section seeks to uncover the perceived benefits and shortcomings of online offerings and how participants rationalize the use of online offerings. Section C explores participants' thoughts on the purpose of online offerings. This section seeks to understand how participants view the purpose of online offerings by specifically discussing educational access and the revenue generating potential of online offerings. Section D provides an opportunity to gauge participants' responses to purposeful statements. Here, participants respond to statements regarding cross-subsidization and online offerings, as well as statements regarding the most important function of online offerings. Lastly, Section E provides participants

an opportunity to add any additional thoughts they believe are pertinent to accurately understanding their perceptions of online offering.

### **Data Analysis**

In alignment with a constructivist approach, I utilized Braun and Clark's (2006) inductive thematic analysis method to review and examine the data. Thematic analysis is valued among qualitative researchers as a tool for identifying relevant pieces of data and for organizing data according to the particular phenomenon being examined. It is the process of identifying themes or patterns within the data where the researcher serves as an instrument of interpretation during the entire research process. As such, the researcher is responsible for understanding, clarifying, and explaining the data. Decisions regarding what data mean, what is relevant, and which data points to code are determined and made by the researcher. Among the various stages of the qualitative research process, data analysis is arguably the most complex and debated among researchers (Thorne, 2000). Unfortunately, many qualitative studies do not include detailed accounts of the data analysis process, nor do they describe the approaches utilized by the researcher (Nowell et al., 2017), which can put into question the research findings and the study's rigor. While the researcher serves as the instrument of data analysis and interpretation, scholars have argued for a detailed accounting of how data analysis is performed and the rationale for the researcher's decisions throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Caelli et al., 2003). Multiple approaches to performing thematic analysis currently exist within qualitative research (Aronson, 1995; Attride-Stirling, 2001; Belotto, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006; DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest et al., 2012; Hayes, 1997; Singer & Hunter, 1999), which allow researchers to be selective in choosing an approach, allowing the approach to correspond to the particular study. However, to reduce subjectivity and burgeon a

study's trustworthiness, qualitative researchers must clearly document their specific approach to data analysis and outline the techniques they implement.

Importantly, thematic analysis is not a prescribed method for analyzing qualitative data, nor is there one set of steps that differentiates thematic analysis from other forms of data analysis. While certain researchers may ascribe to a specific form of thematic analysis, this method is more appropriately described as an overarching approach to data analysis. Boyatzis (1998) articulates that thematic analysis is not another qualitative method but rather "a process that can be used with most, if not all, qualitative methods" (p. 4). The following is an overview of the thematic analysis process I used in this study.

Braun and Clarke (2006) positioned thematic analysis as an approach that is "essentially independent of theory and epistemology" (p. 5), providing the researcher with freedom and flexibility throughout the analysis process. While the freedom afforded to thematic analysis increases its usefulness to researchers in a variety of situations, Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined "a vocabulary and recipe" for thematic analysis in order to avoid criticisms that "anything goes" in qualitative research (p. 5). Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006) noted, it is impossible for researchers to completely remove their analysis from their foundational beliefs of research and knowledge, and therefore an inductive approach should be viewed more as an on-going process striving toward an unattainable goal. However, this belief supports the constructivist paradigm that knowledge is created by the subject and the researcher.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis method consists of six phases. The first phase is "familiarize yourself with your data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). In this phase, researchers should immerse themselves in the data and ensure they understand the content and the subjects being discussed.

The second phase is “generating initial codes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18). This step occurs after the researcher understands the content of the data and is able to identify pieces of data “that appear interesting” or serve as a foundational element of meaning in regard to the subject being examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18).

The third phase is labeled “searching for themes” and normally takes place after the entire data set is initially coded by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). The aim is to focus on grouping individual codes into categories of codes, or themes. Some codes naturally group together, whereas others may stand alone or be considered un-themed or miscellaneous codes. Regardless, the focus in this phase should be on identifying significance in the data. The significance may reveal itself as a prominent theme or possibly as a stand-alone code with considerable emphasis.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) fourth phase is called “reviewing themes” (p. 20). Here, the researcher examines the newly created themes to determine their appropriateness as individual themes and their relation to other themes. The researcher should evaluate whether each theme has enough data to support its existence or if any themes should be combined with each other. From there, the researcher needs to determine if the identified themes support the overall meanings coming from the data set with the aim of having themes that accurately reflect the data. Here, the researcher should return to the entire dataset, re-read it, and determine the appropriateness of the created themes.

Phase five is called “defining and naming themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). While names may already be assigned to categories, this phase emphasizes refining each category to better understand and identify the “essence of what each theme [category] is about” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). This is a vital phase, as the researcher needs to explain in detail the extent

of each category and how the theme relates to the data set and the overall phenomenon being examined.

Continuing with the data analysis strategy, the sixth and last phase according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is to produce a report. Essentially this is the writing and formal communication of one's research findings.

### **Ethics**

Prior to starting data collection, I obtained approval from BSU's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this research. Additionally, I took precautions to ensure the anonymity of each participant. Participants' names were not be used during the study or in the final dissertation. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym and I only use the pseudonym when referring to a particular participant. As the primary researcher, I am the only one with access to the participants' names and I stored their names and pseudonyms in a digitally locked file. Additionally, given the roles of certain participants, safeguarding anonymity may be jeopardized based on participants' professional titles. As such, I only refer to participants by their pseudonyms and the personnel type that they are assigned (i.e., administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, or third space professional). Furthermore, I discussed and explained the purpose of the study and walked each participant through the IRB consent guidelines prior to each interview.

### **Pilot Study**

In the spring of 2020, I conducted a pilot study in my HIED 588 qualitative methods II course. The pilot study focused on student and faculty perceptions of online learning. Importantly, my desire to examine perceptions of online learning predated the COVID-19 pandemic, which as a result, vaulted online learning as a major topic of conversation and

research focus. The pilot study was guided by two research questions: 1) How do college students and faculty perceive online learning at their institution? And 2) What are the major factors contributing to stakeholders' perception of online learning? The study utilized a qualitative approach, and I was able to interview four participants: two students and two faculty members. Through these interviews, the following themes emerged: online as correspondence; online as collaborative; residential is superior or online as inferior; role of online; similarities of residential and online; quality and rigor; and online as convenient.

Although the pilot study was relatively small, it provided me with valuable experience as a researcher and served to guide my research pursuits. I learned from the experience that I was more interested in the purpose of online education from an organizational or institutional perspective. An interview from one of the faculty participants particularly stuck with me. He discussed the relationship between revenue and education and how online offerings are an institutional balancing act between the two. These experiences and findings directly influenced my desire to examine perceptions of online offerings from a more organizational perspective.

### **Trustworthiness**

Due to the nature of qualitative research and the role a researcher plays in a constructivist approach, trustworthiness is essential. Trustworthiness ensures validation standards and increases the credibility of the research and its findings. Utilizing Creswell and Poth's (2018) validation approach, I implemented member checking and researcher reflexivity. While I have already detailed my researcher reflexivity in the Researcher Positionality section of this chapter, I continued to document my thoughts throughout the study through extensive memoing. Member checking allows participants to review the researcher's findings to ensure that they accurately capture the participants' views, beliefs, and experiences. Once I completed, transcribed, and

analyzed each interview, I created a summary document for each participant. The summary document included the main themes that emerged from the data and any direct quote or paraphrasing that I intended to include in the research findings. This allowed each participant to validate that my findings are accurate, and it presented an opportunity to increase truthfulness by allowing participants to make changes if they deemed it necessary or appropriate.

### **Summary of Research Methods**

This chapter provided an overview of the research approach I used in this study. I have provided the research design and methods that I feel are appropriate to examine perceptions of online offerings across different personnel types at an institution of higher education. Guided and informed by my research questions, I aimed to conduct a qualitative instrumental case study from a constructivist approach. As such, I have detailed my positionality reflection and provided an overview of the research site, participants, and data collection and data analysis strategies. The data collected from these strategies are presented in Chapter Four.

## Chapter 4: Research Findings

### Overview

This chapter begins by restating the purpose of this dissertation and the guiding research questions, followed by a brief overview of the study's participants and data analysis through which four overarching themes emerged. The remainder of this chapter details each of the four themes and their various sub-themes.

The purpose of this study is to understand how decision makers in various roles within a higher education institution perceive the purpose and role of online offerings at their institution. The research was guided by the following research questions: 1) How do online higher education decision makers perceive the purpose of online offerings?; 2) What major factors influence online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings?; and 3) How do online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types?

This study employed a qualitative research design, which consisted of semi-structured interviews with 12 higher education professionals at BSU. Each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes in length and was conducted via Zoom video conferencing. I transcribed each interview verbatim within 24 hours of the actual interview. After data analysis was complete, I utilized member checking by sharing summary level data with participants. Each summary highlighted major themes, several direct quotes, and paraphrased sections I intended to use in this study's findings. None of the participants requested substantive changes based on the summary documents, but several participants did re-confirm that their participation remain anonymous and that aliases be used.



## Data Analysis

Data analysis utilized Braun and Clark's (2006) inductive thematic analysis method, which consists of six phases. The first phase is "familiarize yourself with your data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 16). In this phase, the researchers should immerse themselves in the data and ensure they understand the content and the subjects being discussed. I completed this phase by conducting each interview, transcribing them verbatim, and by reading them multiple times to ensure clarity.

The second phase is "generating initial codes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18). This occurs after the researcher understands the content of the data and is able to identify pieces of data "that appear interesting" or serve as a foundational element of meaning in regard to the subject being examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 18). I completed this by performing open coding on quotes or sections of interviews I found salient or interesting in relation to the purpose of this dissertation. Approximately 550 initial codes were identified in this phase. However, in reviewing the initial codes to ensure significance to the research questions, close to 75 codes were removed for lacking significance to the purpose of the study. The remainder of data analysis utilized 474 codes.

The third phase is labeled "searching for themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 19). This phase focuses on grouping individual codes into categories of codes and then themes by identifying significance in the data. I accomplished this by reviewing the 474 initial codes for similarities and overlapping concepts. This resulted in creating 52 grouped codes. The grouped codes were then reviewed to ensure alignment and significance to the purpose of the study as well as to validate the appropriateness of the grouping of the initial codes. I then identified similarities across grouped codes and worked to further group data into 20 categories or tertiary

themes. From there, I identified similarities among the tertiary themes to create groupings of nine subthemes. Again, through reviewing the groupings of data in terms of alignment and significance to the purpose of the study, subthemes were used to identify four main overarching themes.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) fourth phase is called "reviewing themes" (p. 20). Here, the researcher examines the newly created themes to determine their appropriateness as individual themes and their relation to other themes. To complete this phase, I reviewed each theme, its subthemes, tertiary themes, grouped codes, initial codes, and direct quotes to ensure each theme had enough data to support its existence or if any themes should be combined with each other. Initially, I had a fifth theme, but upon further review I determined that the fifth theme did not possess enough data to stand alone and would be more appropriate as a subtheme under one of the other four themes. Each of the final four themes is supported by data from two to three subthemes, four to six tertiary themes, and at least nine of the 52 grouped codes.

Phase five is called "defining and naming themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). While names may already be assigned to themes, this phase emphasizes refining each category to better understand and identify the "essence of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 22). To complete this, I summarized the purpose of each theme in detail and how each theme relates to the other themes, the data set, and the overall purpose of the study. The four themes are as follows: 1) Access is a two-way street; 2) Core versus periphery; 3) Online as a revenue stream; and 4) Net revenue versus quality.

The sixth and last phase according to Braun and Clarke (2006) is to produce a report. This final phase is achieved through the writing of this chapter, which details each of the four

themes, their subthemes, tertiary themes, and numerous quotes from participants to support these findings.

## Participants

Participants for this study were identified through purposive sampling and snowball sampling based on their professional responsibilities pertaining to managing, teaching, and/or influencing online offerings at BSU. In order to determine if and how perceptions of online offerings vary by position, each participant was classified into one of the following personnel roles: administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, or third space professional (Whitchurch, 2012). Four individuals were identified and participated for each of the three personnel roles, resulting in a total of 12 individuals who participated in the study. Every participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect anonymity and to create a relaxed environment where participants could freely share their experiences and thoughts. Additionally, given the roles of certain participants, safeguarding anonymity may be jeopardized based on participants' professional titles. As such, participants are only referred to by their pseudonyms and the personnel type that they are assigned (i.e., administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, or third space professional). Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of each participant, their assigned personnel role, and their number of codes grouped under each of the four main themes.

*Table 4.1 Participants by personnel role and theme.*

<b>Participants (pseudonyms)</b>	<b>Personnel Role</b>	<b>Theme 1: Access is a two-way street</b>	<b>Theme 2: Core versus periphery</b>	<b>Theme 3: Online as a revenue stream</b>	<b>Theme 4: Net revenue versus quality</b>
Anne	Administration	9	21	12	5
Courtney	Administration	6	17	9	6

Liz	Administration	5	9	6	15
Samuel	Administration	8	16	3	5
Julie	Tenure-track faculty who teach online	5	6	7	5
Marcus	Tenure-track faculty who teach online	4	15	14	21
Peter	Tenure-track faculty who teach online	5	8	10	4
Tasha	Tenure-track faculty who teach online	11	9	8	3
Jim	Third Space	12	16	10	5
Mark	Third Space	12	15	10	5
Tom	Third Space	4	8	6	13
Wendy	Third Space	13	16	12	7

While one of the research questions was to examine if and how perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types, participants shared similar views regardless of their assigned personnel role. These similar views were grouped during data analysis and eventually worked to support the creation of the four overarching themes. As such, each theme is supported by participants in each personnel role and there are only minor differences by personnel group. Table 4.2 provides the percentages of codes by personnel role that support each of the four main themes.

*Table 4.2 Percentages of theme codes by personnel role*

<b>Personnel Role</b>	<b>Theme 1: Access is a two-way street</b>	<b>Theme 2: Core versus periphery</b>	<b>Theme 3: Online as a revenue stream</b>	<b>Theme 4: Net revenue versus quality</b>
Total Administration	34%	38%	36%	23%
Total Tenure-track faculty who teach online	28%	30%	37%	48%
Total Third Space	38%	32%	27%	29%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Since participants from each personnel role shared related perspectives that contributed to and support the four overarching themes, the remainder of this chapter explores combined findings across personnel roles that support each theme, subtheme, and tertiary theme. This structure reduces repetitive sections and aids in enhancing the overall flow of the presentation of research findings. Additionally, while participants shared similar perspectives regardless of their personnel role, I include a subsection under each theme to document any of the minor discrepancies I identified across the three personnel roles. Importantly, these minor discrepancies are more contextual in nature and speak to the nuanced experiences of participants in different personnel roles and do not substantially alter participants' general sentiments regarding the purpose of online offerings.

### **Findings Overview and Context**

As outlined in Chapter One, an approach to understanding perceptions of an institution's online offerings is to consider a spectrum spanning from a mission focus to that of a market focus. Clark Kerr detailed a useful analogy comparing the tension within higher education institutions to that between the sacred Greek acropolis and the agora (Kerr, 1988). The acropolis, built high upon a hill, stood for society's commitment to beliefs, ethics, and mission. Conversely, the agora, or marketplace, was "led by ungodly commercial interests and scheming public officials and venal academic leaders..." (Kerr, 1988). Universities often find themselves somewhere on the hillside between the two, striving to balance the need to respond to markets while remaining committed to mission. Adding additional context to this spectrum, Gordon Winston's (1999) analogy comparing the university to both a church and to a car dealership is equally compelling. Universities are like churches in that they believe strongly in their purpose and mission and endeavor to increase student access and provide financial aid to disadvantaged

students. However, universities are simultaneously like car dealerships that recruit the best students with merit-based aid while providing the same education at full cost to other students (Winston, 1999). A university's ability to function within the market while simultaneously pursuing its educational mission speaks to the complexities of higher education institutions.

Universities are multifaceted organizations, "essentially part church and part car dealer, devoted partly to charity and partly to commerce," which when faced with finite resources, creates tension between the two (Winston, 1999, p. 31). However, determining what university functions fall under what role is much less clear. To understand the role of any one activity, namely online offerings, it is helpful to observe the individuals who make decisions that shape and influence the activity at the institution.

Based on the interviews from the study, participants perceive online education as serving more of a market purpose than a mission purpose for the institution. While many participants convey that both the market and the mission are often pursued simultaneously, decisions are made to suggest that the market purpose is the primary function of online education and must be secure for the mission purpose to occur. At times, decisions are made to focus resources toward the market purpose at the detriment of the mission purpose, however the opposite scarcely occurs and when it does, it is often met with resistance. The following themes were identified from participant interviews and suggest that higher education professionals at BSU perceive online offerings as aligned much closer to Kerr's (1988) agora and Winston's (1999) car dealerships than to the acropolis and churches, respectively.

### **Theme One: Access is a Two-way Street**

Throughout the interviews, the concept of access was mentioned many times and was referenced by every participant to some degree. However, participants used access to refer to two

separate things: access *for* students and access *to* students. Not only does this theme establish a foundation on which the other three themes stand, it also nicely supports the notion that the purpose of online education does indeed exist on a spectrum spanning from the market purpose of gaining access to new students and subsequent new tuition revenue, to the mission purpose of providing increased educational access for students. To varying extents, each participant acknowledged this duality of purpose and resulting tension.

### **Providing access for students**

The purpose of online education being to increase educational access for students was a common view in all interviews. In fact, when asked directly if participants believed the purpose of online offerings was to increase educational access, nearly every participant answered in the affirmative, although several alluded to online offerings having multiple purposes. The following subsections detail how participants perceive online offerings increase student access through removing geographical barriers, providing greater flexibility and convenience, and by aligning with BSU's educational mission.

#### ***Geographical barriers removed***

Participants were clear about online offerings' contributions toward increasing educational access through the removal of geographical and physical distance barriers. Samuel details how with online offerings, "geography is completely removed as a barrier and access is increased." Geography being seen a barrier to access and online being used to remove that barrier was a sentiment shared by other participants as well. Tasha explains:

You can offer a master's program to someone who can't leave their geographical location...adult learners, people with families and full-time jobs. And you know, when I

went to school you had to move to the university or you didn't get your degree. So, it really makes education accessible to people. –*Tasha*

Tasha went on to explain how geography is not only a barrier, but also a limitation. Many students have poor educational access because there are limited educational opportunities in close geographical proximity. BSU's online offerings help to increase access for these student populations.

Similarly, when asked what she sees as the main purpose of online offerings, Wendy explains:

...access is obviously one of the biggest. So, I could be in California and still...get a degree or I can be in a small town in Alaska, [where] we have several students actually, and I have no options right, it's not like I have a California university down the road, I have very few options, and so I think that is one of the bigger reasons. –*Wendy*

Wendy felt strongly that many students are in geographical locations where there is limited access to brick-and-mortar institutions and that BSU's online offerings provide increased educational access to these populations.

Julie further supported the notion that online offerings increase student access. She expressed that she felt increasing educational access was the most important function of online offerings, "particularly to certain groups who can't make it to campus and can't fulfill their educational requirements." Being able to complete courses online increases access for students who are unable to relocate to campus and who are unable to commute.



### *Flexibility and convenience*

One of the most common explanations for how online offerings increase educational access for students was through providing a more flexible and convenient student experience. Liz explains:

The flexibility is what I hear over and over again from our students that they want. They want a rigorous, robust, rich, high quality, learning experience, but they need the flexibility because, you know, many of them are working adult professionals, they have day jobs...it fits better in their schedule, like the offering of a given course was conflicting with when they needed to take another course... so if they can take it online, then they can fit it in. *–Liz*

Liz mentioned flexibility regarding class times because BSU's online courses are asynchronous, which allows students to complete weekly assignments at times that work best for them and their unique schedules. Liz also mentioned that many online students are working adults. In fact, the overwhelming majority of BSU's online students are working professionals and the average age of BSU's online students is 29. Anne further supported this sentiment. Anne explains:

For someone, especially the type of audience our programs look for, being able to retain your job and stay on your career track while you're going to school is a big deal. So that and the flexibility of it all...I think that's huge. You can keep your job...so you have an income. *–Anne*

Here, Anne attributed the flexibility of online offerings to increasing educational access to working professionals. Additionally, she referenced the financial component of keeping one's job and income. While financial access is often discussed in terms of being able to pay to attend school, Anne discussed financial access in terms of the opportunity cost, which for many

students is the missed or lost income that they may have to forfeit to attend school. This concept is especially resonant because adult working professionals make up the majority of BSU's online students.

Peter also discussed the adult student population and how the flexibility and convenience of online offerings serve to increase student access. Peter explains:

Online students are typically older with jobs and families and so they have a greater chance of having an issue that could take away from their focus on school. So yeah, there is more flex for online and the flex probably helps students...I've had people that have been in hospital beds with Covid...I've had people that have lost loved ones...I've had a student that has a father and two brothers fighting in Ukraine. So, you know, when you do online, you're able to flex a little bit more than if you were residential...you just wouldn't be able to go, and that would be it. *—Peter*

Julie also shared this sentiment, especially for adult students who have other priorities that must be managed around school. Julie explains:

I have many women in my classes that have small children, and they say, I can't even study until I get my children to bed at eight o'clock at night, and I do my studying from eight thirty, or nine o'clock until one o'clock in the morning or something like that...without online education a degree from BSU is not going to be available to somebody like that. *—Julie*

Again, many of Peter's and Julie's students are adults with either family or work responsibilities who find a traditional residential college experience inaccessible. BSU's online students often enroll part-time because of their other responsibilities.

Tom also commented on the increased flexibility and convenience afforded by online offerings. He explains:

But for me, I've always tried to grasp the fact that there are legitimate people out there who are constrained by space and time. They can't get to campus. They can't drive two hours to campus for various personal reasons. They are 35 years old; they never had a chance to go to college. Why should we deny [them] the opportunity to have access to higher education? Those are the people I teach online for. Those are who I imagine this is for. We don't have to give them the classroom experience. What matters is, are they able to learn what we want them to learn and do what we want them to do? Whatever it takes to get that to happen is what matters. –*Tom*

Most online students at BSU have extracurricular responsibilities and Tom believes online offerings should cater to this population by providing increased flexibility and in doing so, educational access for these students will increase.

Wendy also provided views of how online offerings increase educational access by providing a more flexible experience for learners. She explains:

Depending on how the online program is set up, flexibility is going to be a huge benefit. So, if it's asynchronous or even if it's not asynchronous, it's still much more flexible than driving to campus and sitting in a seat...so flexibility, I think it's a real benefit and I think this goes along with flexibility, but the fact that somebody who's working full-time can juggle school and work and family without the added stress of physically coming to campus; I think it makes it more comfortable. –*Wendy*

Wendy went on to explain how she chose to take online courses at BSU even though she works on campus and lives very close by. For her, geography was not a barrier. Wendy needed an

educational experience that allowed her to balance work and family responsibilities, which she feels BSU's online offerings provided.

### ***Educational mission***

Participants also mentioned the humanitarian benefits of online offerings and their alignment to the educational mission of BSU. BSU's mission statement specifically mentions distance learning and providing unmatched access to quality education. Participants discussed BSU's online offerings as a way that BSU carries out and accomplishes its mission.

Tasha argued that online offerings are the most "inclusive" and "democratic" way of educating. She continues:

The purpose of public education is to increase the knowledge of the citizenry so we can vote in good people...it's our job to educate as many people as possible. How could you do that if people can't leave their job to go to a class? –*Tasha*

This sentiment was shared by many participants, and they often referenced the educational mission of BSU or the land-grant mission during their interviews. Marcus mentioned the "educational mission" of online offerings as something he feels "passionately" about. He adds, "I think it's awesome that we support those audiences...not just people that can afford to be here and have resident program experiences."

Mark agreed that online offerings help to remove the physical barrier that limits educational access, but he also mentioned the notion of educational quality that is referenced in BSU's mission statement. Mark explains:

I believe we are delivering a quality education and I recognize there's a big population of potential students who are not able to avail themselves of this quality education because

they can't physically get here and take two to four years out of their life, and online education is the bridge that enables me to reach that student population. *—Mark*

Mark made an important distinction between access to education and access to quality education. Populations of students who are unable to physically attend BSU might still have access to education, but without online offerings provided by institutions like BSU, the quality of education may be of lesser quality. Jim further supports this notion and explains:

I really think that... do it from anywhere and access to high-quality institutions is a real huge benefit. I mean, I have worked with so many students who couldn't have access because they lived in a rural area, or they lived in an area like California, where there's not physical seats in the classroom, so they didn't have good options. So, the access thing has really been, I think, a great thing. *—Jim*

Mark and Jim both mentioned the notion of access to quality education and acknowledged that other educational opportunities were available to students, however both participants explained that these other opportunities were either already full or might not be of the same quality as BSU.

### **Gaining access to students**

While all participants expressed how they believe BSU's online offerings increase access for students, an equal, if not stronger notion was how online offerings increase the institution's access to student populations. Samuel succinctly conveys this dichotomy:

In many ways that's how BSU is using their online offerings. Geography is completely removed as a barrier and access is increased. And the access is a two-way street. Students have more access by not being limited by geography or responsibilities that prevent them from attending as a traditional student. BSU has access to more students. Online is used to tap into new markets of students. *—Samuel*

The notion that BSU's online offerings are used to gain access to new student populations was commonly shared by participants and was often expressed alongside beliefs that online offerings increase access for students. In following Samuel's analogy, none of the participants feel BSU's online offerings operate solely as a one-way street; participants argued BSU's online offerings increase educational access for students and increases the institution's access to students.

The following subsections detail how participants perceive online offerings increase BSU's access to new student populations through increasing the size of the prospective student pool, attracting new and different student populations, and by expanding BSU's capacity.

### ***Larger prospective student pool***

An often-cited benefit of online offerings is that they expand BSU's reach to new student populations. By providing a more flexible learning experience, independent of students' geographical locations, BSU's online offerings greatly increase the pool of prospective students who may consider applying and enrolling at BSU.

Liz discussed how this perspective not only currently exists but was also an original reason for setting up BSU's online offerings. She explains:

But that initial reason for being hasn't changed and it's certainly why our online unit started... you know, we wanted to bring net new students to BSU who otherwise we wouldn't have been able to reach...we don't have to turn away students anymore, so we try to attract the working mom or the military vet or whoever. *-Liz*

With the responsibilities and constraints that so many adult learners face, BSU uses the flexibility and convenience of its online offerings to access these student populations who otherwise would not have been able to attend BSU.

Julie also discussed using online offerings to increase enrollments in her program, and Tasha explained how her program is attractive to more students than ever before because it is delivered online. Additionally, Marcus discussed using online offerings to expand the “footprint” of his program and as a way to engage new student populations. Participants shared how the online modality allows for more niche programs, which might struggle to get enrollments in a residential format, to excel as an online offering because of the increased reach of prospective students.

Several participants even discussed how accessing new student populations through online formats has become an integral function of BSU’s online offerings. Jim explains:

That became a driving factor for a lot of programs that may have been dying. In fact, one of my programs that I’m a part of, if they hadn’t gone to online, we would have been cut.

This was before I joined, but the [previous] Dean actually said that to the previous department head...either you go online or you’re probably going to get cut because the department had shrunk so small and was reaching so few students. –*Jim*

Jim’s description not only suggests that accessing new student populations is a function of what online offerings do, it makes it a critical component or even a lifeline for certain residential programs that struggle to attract prospective students.

Jim’s account detailed how certain residential programs move online to gain access to new student populations, but accessing new student populations has become more challenging in recent years due to increased competition for students. As Mark explained, although BSU uses its online offerings to access new student populations, growing enrollments remains a struggle because prospective students have more educational options than ever before. Mark continues:

One thing that we have worked to educate the college about is the competitive landscape that we operate in. In 2012, when this program started, we were the only institution with an online program among our peer institutions. There are now 137 online programs from institutions whose brands and rigor are as strong as ours. So, the competitive landscape for the pool of potential students has changed exponentially. –*Mark*

Wendy also detailed the challenges of accessing new student populations in an increasingly crowded marketplace. She explains:

It's interesting because that is kind of the message that is being received like...hey, you guys used to be like this behemoth... like you were it. You were the biggest program here, the biggest online program. Now you only have like 300 active students, which is a lot, but we used to have like a thousand. But...there's a lot more competitors in the market. I think they're saying, what's going on? What can you do to make things better? So, they're saying you need to do better...applications are down, or enrollments are too low. –*Wendy*

Mark and Wendy both discussed how enrollment growth has become increasingly challenging as more institutions have started offering online programs. While BSU has access to new student populations through its online offerings, other institutions with online offerings also have access to the same student populations. With more institutions offering online offerings and competing for the same populations of students, successful online programs have expanded their recruitment strategies beyond more traditional student populations.



### *New and different student populations*

In addition to using online offerings to reach populations with too many responsibilities and constraints to attend in person, participants provided views that BSU uses online offerings to reach student populations who would not likely be admitted to a residential program.

Samuel discussed how many residential programs are geared toward first-time, full-time students, “but there [is] also a large population of students who started college but never finished.” These students are not highly fought over by residential programs with a limited number of seats. However, Samuel continues, “that's the market that we are in...we take advantage of that market...the students who didn't finish and we help them complete, that's why BSU has online programs and BSU has benefitted greatly from online.” Samuel detailed how online offerings fill a void left by residential offerings. Many of BSU's online students attempted college previously and have earned transfer credits. As Samuel said, BSU attempts to attract these students and help them finish their degree.

Peter also discussed how online offerings have helped his program's enrollment increase because it grants access to students from all over the world. Peter explains:

I think online education...increases the number of and the scope of people that can be taking the courses that otherwise wouldn't be taking the courses. We wouldn't have nearly the students we have if we didn't put it online. I've had so many students who live in other states and even countries, no way they all pick up and come to campus. *—Peter*

Peter discussed how the online modality allows students who would not have considered attending BSU to reconsider BSU as an option for their education.

Furthermore, Marcus discussed how online offerings help increase BSU's access to new and different student populations. He explains:

We are expanding the audience of people that get to engage with what we do. We benefit from that; we get to engage with them. But then, also, we are not just limiting ourselves to the people that can afford to be here physically, which is a very small number of people. We are radically expanding the pool [of] potential students. And if you work in these programs, you know, it's like totally different stories. It's not eighteen-year-olds on campus. It's like people coming back from military deployments. It's lots of mid-career professionals who are like I don't know what I'm doing anymore...So it's not just people that can afford to be here...that option is not open for many, way more people than we'll ever touch with the residential experience. *—Marcus*

Marcus detailed some of the differences between online and residential students and how these differences greatly reduce the likelihood of online students physically attending a residential campus. However, Marcus then explains how BSU uses its online offerings to “radically [expand] the pool of potential students” beyond what could be accomplished with residential offerings.

Similarly, Mark discussed military students as a new and different student population that can be reached through online offerings. He explains:

Whatever our initial incentive to move into that [online] space was...what we discovered is it has enabled us to engage an entirely different and new student population. You know many of our active-duty military students would not be able to benefit from a BSU education if we didn't have an online delivery mode, and that has been tremendously powerful. The online program has enabled us to meet that need for very highly qualified people. *—Mark*

In addition to Mark's comments, the other participants were clear that the online student population is different than the residential population. Online students are in different life situations than most residential students and a residential experience would not work for most online learners. BSU's online offerings allow the institution to engage with and provide an educational experience that is catered to this different population.

### ***Expanding capacity***

Furthering the notion that online offerings are used to access new student populations and increase enrollment, participants specifically addressed the capacity limitations of brick-and-mortar campuses and how BSU uses online offerings to expand its student population beyond the constraints of a physical campus.

Anne discussed using online offerings to increase enrollments beyond the limitations of the physical classroom. "We want to have the biggest class we can," Anne explains, "but with the best students." She detailed how the reach of online offerings increases the pool of prospective students, so not only do enrollments increase, but programs can be more selective in who they accept. Similarly, Samuel details:

they recognize that even if they have the great problem of filling up that dorm, and they can't add another student to the dorm, that does not mean that they have to stop enrolling students at that point. They can still enroll students through online. So, more and more they are looking to manage those online course offerings as extra seats. –*Samuel*

Here, Samuel provided a perception that BSU uses online offerings to increase enrollment numbers beyond what BSU could manage with only a residential experience.

Similarly, Wendy explained that one of her programs has quickly benefited from the expanded pool of prospective students and now "has students all over the country." Likewise,

Jim noted that once programs started being offered online, “we saw enormous enrollment growth” far exceeding what was ever experienced by BSU’s residential offerings.

Lastly, Anne discussed the expanded reach that online offerings have on prospective student populations. In discussing the potential reach of online offerings, Anne described there being “a tremendous amount of firepower in being able to further enhance your brand globally and your presence globally, especially when it comes to growing enrollments and bringing in tuition dollars.” As detailed in the previous section, geography as a barrier to access is removed; therefore, BSU’s prospective student population essentially becomes a global one, a reality far exceeding the capacity of BSU’s residential campus.

### **Discrepancies across personnel roles**

The findings in the above sections highlight shared sentiments from participants from each personnel role, however, minor discrepancies were identified across personnel roles. For example, a difference between participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role and participants in the administration and third space professionals personnel roles is that the administration and third space professionals participants discussed accessing new populations of students for a variety of online offerings, whereas the responses from participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online role were tailored more to their specific program.

Additionally, when examining participants in the administration role, perceptions seemed to more strongly support the idea that online offerings were used to access new student populations than to provide greater educational access. To clarify, participants in the administration role provided support for both purposes, but I found their support for accessing new student populations as marginally stronger than their support for providing student access.

Lastly, participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online and third space professional personnel roles provided more personal examples detailing experiences working with specific students than participants did in the administration personnel role. From their examples, tenure-track faculty who teach online and third space professionals participants seemed to have a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of BSU's online students as compared to participants in the administration role.

### **Theme One Summary**

The concept of access and the dichotomy of purpose between online offerings providing access *for* students and online offerings providing access *to* students was referenced or acknowledged by every participant. Interestingly, while this research utilizes a framework that places the purpose of online offerings on a spectrum spanning from a mission purpose of providing access for students and a market purpose of gaining access to new students, most participants believed online offerings accomplished both simultaneously. Participants perceive BSU's online offerings as an avenue toward increasing the institution's access to new student populations, which in turn, increases those populations' educational access. Consequently, the desired outcomes of either end of the spectrum are similar: online offerings increase student enrollment. However, as the following three themes detail, while universities are "essentially part church and part car dealer, devoted partly to charity and partly to commerce," tension between these two can be found when faced with finite resources (Winston, 1999, p. 31). While participants perceive BSU's online offerings serve both roles for the institution, their experiences help to illuminate the primary role of BSU's online offerings.

## **Theme 2: Core vs. Periphery**

Now that participants' perceptions of the purpose of BSU's online offerings are positioned on the spectrum and at times in multiple locations on the spectrum simultaneously, this second theme begins to uncover and provide context to the participants' perceived primary role of BSU's online offerings. The following sections highlight examples of how BSU's organizational structure, culture, and use of online offerings place online offerings on the university's periphery, or what Zemsky et al., (2005) refers to as the "perimeters," which tend to be for much more market-focused activities (p. 55). While peripheral activities are vital for an organization's survival, they are often viewed as separate endeavors, unaligned to the core mission or purpose of the institution. As such, this theme begins by detailing how negative or lesser-than views of online education persist throughout the institution and further support online offerings' placement on the periphery. I then discuss a major function of the periphery, which is to generate funds to support core functions. BSU accomplishes this by leveraging its online offerings to subsidize activities positioned within the institution's core. Lastly, due to the subsidizing role and the desire to generate funds to support core functions, I detail how BSU's online offerings are particularly market reactive and specifically focused on net revenue generation.

### **Modality hierarchy**

Throughout the interviews, participants conveyed notions of a hierarchy of university functions. Often, these views were described as certain functions being thought of as more or less important, prestigious, or in alignment with the institution's mission. Interestingly, BSU's online offerings, which are suggested to fall within the institution's periphery, are also believed by participants to be perceived throughout the institution as a less important function, less

prestigious, and not strongly aligned to the institution's mission. Throughout the interviews, participants regularly made statements that compared BSU's online offerings to its residential offerings. These statements largely fell into two categories: 1) perceptions that online offerings are lesser, and 2) online is equal to or even more rigorous than residential. Importantly, participants' statements about online offerings being lesser were largely participants discussing others' perceptions or perceptions stemming from the core of the institution and not necessarily their own. However, statements about online offerings being equal to residential offerings were participants' own beliefs.

***Online viewed as lesser***

In discussing prevailing views of online offerings at BSU, Anne discussed how online offerings are viewed as less important compared to residential offerings. Anne explains:

I think residential is viewed as more important than online. Like if online enrollments decline, it's not good because...it's also a decline in tuition dollars for the university, but if residential enrollments decline, that is a disaster. It's like an attack on our most sacred thing. Don't get me wrong, people will be upset about online losing money, but it would be focused on the money loss and not so much an attack on who you are at your core.

–Anne

Here, Anne made two connections of note. The first is between a core function of the university and its ascribed high level of importance, and the second is between a periphery function of the university and its revenue generating role. Although teaching and learning are occurring in both residential and online, Anne suggested varying levels of importance based on the modality.

Similarly, in discussing how online offerings are viewed throughout her department, Liz explains:

I think another challenge we run into is faculty and administrators...people who still, after all this time, are skeptical that it's as good as, and can't even conceive that it can be even better than face-to-face instruction. I just heard yesterday about a colleague of mine who I really think the world of...and was surprised to hear that he's been a big naysayer...'oh online isn't as good and yada yada.' I am always surprised that after 30 years and countless research showing that the learning outcomes are as good if not better, it boggles my mind that there are still people who are skeptical. *–Liz*

Liz's experience working with colleagues who are skeptical of online offerings was common among other participants. Interestingly, Liz mentioned research that contradicts her colleague's beliefs; however, the research seems to have little influence in changing her colleague's opinion.

Tasha also mentioned working with other faculty members in her department and their resistance to online offerings. Tasha explains:

Online programs don't have as much weight, I guess, as residence. I don't know if that's because it's new and people are unaware of it. What I find is, people don't know. I know that other faculty in my department don't know what our courses look like. I think part of it is that they don't know that it could be quality. *–Tasha*

Tasha discussed how her department's online offerings are not viewed as highly as its residential offerings. She explained that she feels that her online offerings provide quality educational experience, but there are many others who are unaware of how good online offerings can be.

Marcus further detailed Tasha's sentiments. In discussing the quality of his program, he accounted for the cultural difficulties of gaining support for online education due to the pervading view that online is not prestigious. Marcus explains:



There is an ongoing cultural challenge associated with a lot of people who worked here way before there were ever any online programs, who see it as an extra thing that BSU chooses to do, and they might be okay with that, but they might express doubt that it's not the real thing. There's still a fair bit of that that I encounter. Sometimes people will be skeptical about our outcomes or the quality and will see it as not necessarily fitting within the prestige of their unit or our university. I definitely have experienced that. –*Marcus*

However, questioning the quality of online offerings is not necessarily unwarranted. Several participants, including Marcus, explained how many of the lesser-than views of online education stem from the questionable and at times abusive practices by for-profit institutions who are largely credited with developing and first tapping into the online higher education market.

William explained what it was like when BSU first launched online offerings. He detailed how “the majority of the faculty felt as though [it] would be a stain on the institution’s academic reputation.” Likewise, Jim explained that he knows a lot of people who originally didn’t want to do online and that many of them still see it “as a waste of time or a cheaper version of a degree.” Courtney recounted similar notions. She explained that one of her programs was the first to be offered fully online and that “it was not an easy path to gain their buy-in to do that,” and how many faculty opposed the decision and “generally did not support moving their resources in a direction to start an online program.” When I asked why faculty were unsupportive, Courtney explained, “there are many faculty who still do not believe that there is a quality academic experience in an online course.”

Like Courtney’s colleagues, Tom believes that certain online courses at BSU are still of questionable quality. In discussing what it was like when he first started working for BSU, he explains:

I noticed our online courses were mainly correspondence courses...there was no learning happening besides teachers' graded feedback...our teachers were saying we don't want to teach these courses, we're just graders. We don't teach, we just grade. So, we came in and the very first thing we said is that these courses are just correspondence courses where the students are just doing things and turning them in. *–Tom*

Tom explained how he has worked to transform the online experience to one much improved from what it used to be, but there are still online offerings that follow a more correspondence course format with very little student-to-student and student-to-faculty interaction.

***Online attempting to be seen as equal***

While participants provided plenty of examples of how individuals throughout BSU view online offerings as being of questionable quality, lesser than, or generally unbecoming for BSU, the participants themselves hold BSU's online offerings in higher regard. These contrasting views suggest a possible tension between perceptions coming from BSU's core and those stemming from peripheral functions like those of BSU's online offerings. Like Liz's account of being "surprised...that after 30 years and countless research...there are still people who are skeptical" of the quality of online offerings, most participants feel strongly that BSU's online offerings are as rigorous and of equal quality as its residential offerings and that the next step to advance BSU's online offerings is to convince others of the same.

Tasha captured this notion well. She explains:

There's so much potential, I think, getting over that hump of online is less or online is not as good. It's a perception that I think we have to fight. It's new, so the people who aren't early adopters, or who don't like change are going to resist. People are afraid to do it, afraid to try it. They think of it as overwhelming. *–Tasha*

Tasha feels BSU's online offerings are quality and that the issue facing online education at BSU is not a lack of quality; its convincing others that BSU's online offerings already are quality.

Anne's experiences help provide additional context to the "hump" that Tasha discussed above. Anne explains:

I came from the resident [program] so that was my entree into working [with the college]. So admittedly, you know, I come in with a kind of snotty attitude because I'm from the residential side with the best people and courses, and oh those online courses blah blah blah, until I got myself to the [online] side and could actually see for myself the difference. –*Anne*

Anne's account reveals some of the pervading and persisting negative perceptions of online offerings as BSU. However, as Anne detailed, once she experienced BSU's online offerings herself, she realized her perceptions were unfounded.

Like Anne, most of the other participants feel BSU's online offerings are of equal quality to their residential counterparts. Wendy explains:

But if a student said to me, I'm going to BSU online, I'd be like awesome...that's great...I honestly think they're going to get the same level of education, as they would if they were in residence. –*Wendy*

Likewise, when asked if he had any concerns about online students and residential students earning the same credential, Jim explains:

No, I don't. Actually, really part of what drew me to BSU was the fact that I knew it was the same. I have no problem with that at all. I like that [both] courses have to follow faculty senate guidelines, when a course is created. So, for instance, we have, you know,

courses that are taught in residence and online. It's the same course, and they have to follow the same course plan approved by faculty senate. –*Jim*

The notion that courses, regardless of modality, are equal because BSU's faculty senate approves them was also shared by Liz. She explains:

We have a mantra. We've had it since we began at BSU: a course is a course, and a program is a program. Students ought to achieve the same learning outcomes, be able to achieve the same learning outcomes, regardless of how it's delivered...it's the same learning outcomes. It better be. That's one of the reasons we have the approved course proposal from faculty senate. They have the same rigor, the same workload as their face-to-face counterparts. So yeah, it's not less of a course or less of an experience. –*Liz*

Wendy, Jim, and Liz all detailed their beliefs that BSU's online courses were the same in terms of quality and provide students with the same level of education as BSU's residential courses.

While most participants feel that BSU's online offerings are equivalent to BSU's residential offerings in terms of quality, many participants feel that online offerings are even more rigorous. Wendy discussed how online courses typically have more assignments to make up for the time not spent in the classroom. Wendy explains:

But in terms of like quality, I think, quite frankly, online courses are probably a bit more...I want to say difficult...there's more deliverables. It's almost like we're making you do all these extra assignments to make up for [not] sitting in a classroom for three hours a week. So, it does end up being more work if you're doing online coursework than if you're in a physical classroom. –*Wendy*

Wendy's explanation of having more coursework to compensate for not being in a physical classroom was shared by other participants and suggests that even supporters of BSU's online

offerings and advocates of their quality, wrestle with overcompensating due to the prevalent lesser-than views of online offerings throughout the institution.

Similarly, Tom shared his experiences dealing with overcompensating. Tom explains:

I remember there was this one class where students did a bunch of readings and then took a lot of reading quizzes. I remember the course being criticized for not being good enough. So, they sat down and redesigned the course, but all they did was add more assignments and readings to it. But honestly, the course was fine as it was. They went overboard with the assignments so people wouldn't question it. *—Tom*

Tom's belief that the course was originally fine even though decisions were made to make it more rigorous, again suggests a perception that online offerings may have to overcompensate to gain broader support throughout the institution.

Jim also acknowledged how several online courses may have been designed intentionally to compensate for being offered online. He explains:

I've actually been trying to back off of that a little bit, because in some cases there's a lot of busy work which can make it tougher, which doesn't necessarily need to be there. It was put in to make the course more rigorous, but they aren't needed. With them there, I would say online is slightly tougher [than residential]. *—Jim*

Jim further explained how many individuals at BSU were initially against online offerings because they thought online courses would be easier than residential courses. In response, Jim explained how extra assignments were added to online courses to ensure they were rigorous enough for BSU. However, Jim and several other participants have now realized that these extra assignments are more so busy work than anything else.

**Periphery used to subsidize core**

While participants were adamant that BSU's institutional hierarchy places online offerings lower than BSU's core functions, they also detailed a vital role of online offerings', which is to help subsidize the institution's core functions. Interestingly, participants described core functions as being closely aligned to BSU's educational mission; a sentiment that all participants attributed to BSU's online offerings as outlined in Theme One. However, regardless of the alignment to the institution's mission, participants explained a vital role of online offerings is the support and subsidization of the university's core functions. This subsidizing role further supports the notion of a hierarchy of BSU functions and that online offerings are viewed as lesser-than compared to core functions. Additionally, as a peripheral function, BSU's online offerings are not subsidized and therefore must be financially self-sustaining. However, participants argued that being financially self-sustaining often falls short of BSU's expectations. As a peripheral function, BSU's online offerings are expected to generate enough revenue to subsidize the institution's core functions.

***Core functions are subsidized, online is not***

Throughout the interviews, participants discussed the complexities of higher education institutions like BSU. Participants stressed the need to balance institutional mission with more market-driven and revenue-seeking behaviors. Mission-aligned functions are viewed as core functions and are vitally important to BSU's identity and existence. Participants argued that these functions should be preserved, safeguarded, and subsidized when necessary to uphold the institution's mission. However, participants explained that BSU's online offerings are not subsidized and instead need to be self-sustaining.

When asked whether program offerings that do not generate enough revenue to cover their costs should be subsidized, Wendy explained that it depends on the program's alignment to BSU's mission. She continues:

I think there are some programs that are valuable for the service component...there are some programs that probably don't make money or probably need subsidies to maintain their offerings, but they're important programs. For example, if it's diversity related or...it's a service to the community. We are a land-grant institution, and so our goal is not just educating those who can afford it, right? There's a greater purpose. If there's a community need, then yeah, I think those are things that that we should continue. And I think for the most part, the university probably feels the same way. –*Wendy*

Wendy believes that programs that provide a service to the community, align to the land-grant mission, or fulfill a greater purpose should be subsidized if necessary and BSU should continue offering them.

Similarly, Anne shared that programs that “fill a greater need” should be preserved regardless of the program losing money. Anne further details:

I think it depends on what type of program it is, what the goals of the program are, what the expected outcomes are. Let's say there's some kind of an online medical program that is filling a greater need with its graduates for society as a whole, and filling some kind of socially responsible niche, and giving back to the community...you know, the overall mission of the university. I think that's justifiable for the betterment of society to keep a program like that even if the program is losing money. –*Anne*

Anne explained how programs that give back to the community and are aligned to the overall mission of the university are justified regardless of their revenue generating potential. Their existence is supported through their alignment to the institution's mission.

Likewise, Mark added that BSU is fine with programs losing money as long as they are increasing student access and aligned to the land-grant mission. Mark explains:

I see firsthand every day, the benefit of not only an undergraduate education, but a graduate education. We are helping them grow personally and professionally and I think part of the mission of a land-grant institution is to widen the funnel and to make sure that students have access to a BSU education. I don't think that our residential program actually generates any revenue over expenses for the department, but it's serving a broader need. –*Mark*

Again, Mark supports the notion of offering programs that are aligned to the mission of the institution regardless of their revenue generating ability. However, Mark specifically mentioned his residential program as the program that loses money. Interestingly, all participants that discussed preserving offerings aligned to the institution's mission only referred to residential offerings or BSU's offerings in general. Even while holding views outlined in Theme One that online offerings increase student access and help carry out the institution's mission, when asked specifically whether BSU subsidizes online offerings, participants unanimously rejected the notion.

In response to Wendy's statement above, she was asked if she's ever seen BSU fund an online program that was not generating enough revenue to cover its expenses to which she replied, "you mean like that it's being subsidized? Never." When asked the same question, Anne laughed, and responded, "Hell no. Resident [money] flowing back? No, no, no, no." Even though



Liz expressed that revenue from other university endeavors should be used to cross subsidize online offerings, when asked if she's ever seen it done, she replied, "No. Not to my knowledge."

However, several participants explained that BSU's online offerings are granted a "start-up period" of several years to market the program and recruit students. Most online offerings do not generate enough revenue to cover expenses in their first couple of years and they do receive financial assistance during this period. As I discuss under Theme Three, once the start-up period is over, online programs are expected to be financially self-sustaining.

Although all participants stressed that a major purpose of BSU's online offerings is to increase student access, when asked why residential offerings are subsidized and online offerings are not, Peter provided the following:

Because online isn't the focus. Online has always been an extra thing that supplements the classroom. So, if we're going to invest in something, it's going to be residential.

That's why you see new buildings getting built on campus every year and why getting a course release to redesign an online course is such a battle. I know I'm simplifying things here, but residential is the focus. Online is just something extra, a nice to have, if you will. *-Peter*

Peter's statement about BSU's focus being residential instruction and online being something extra or a "nice to have" further supports the notion that online offerings serve a peripheral function at BSU while residential offerings are perceived more as a core function.

### ***Online plays subsidization role***

Participants explained how online offerings not only do not receive on-going subsidies from the university, but the revenues generated from online offerings are regularly used to subsidize core functions. Participants' perceptions of how online offerings are used to help

sustain other university functions further suggests that online offerings are a peripheral function of BSU.

Wendy discussed how revenue generated by one of her online programs is being used to cover the cost of residential initiatives. Wendy explains, “quite frankly, in our department, online programs are sustaining a lot of our residential initiatives right now.” According to other participants, the practice of using revenue generated from online offerings to pay for residential initiatives is quite common.

Similarly, Tasha and Jim detailed examples of how revenue from online offerings have been used to pay for residential expenses. Tasha explains:

But there's other places where I know they're using it to prop up their residential, where they've hired some expensive faculty who don't teach, or there's just mistakes that have been made, and they use all my money to compensate. *—Tasha*

Like Tasha, Jim explained how revenue from online offerings are used to pay for residential faculty to conduct research. He explains, “I know that there are some department heads that I've talked to who use the money to help support course buyouts for their research faculty.” Both Tasha and Jim’s examples reveal how online offerings help subsidize residential offerings.

When discussing the purpose of online offerings and their revenue generating potential, Mark explained how making money through his online program that is then spent elsewhere makes him feel like a good partner to others in his department. He argued that not every program can make money and there are some programs that are important but have difficulty covering their expenses. Mark explains, “I’m generating revenue for my department, and I’m a good partner to my faculty colleagues.” Mark perceives one of his roles is to make money for the department to keep those other programs afloat.

Tom provided a particularly insightful explanation of how BSU uses revenue from its online offerings to subsidize residential offerings. He explains:

The department's primary concern is graduate residential programs. I have a whole metaphor I use. The department is a greenhouse. The tomatoes in the greenhouse are the grad students. We give them all the best soil and sun, and our love and attention and then when they grow, we try to place them in other greenhouses that are prestigious institutions. We then have a garden out back that we hardly pay attention to, and we don't even really know what is going on, but it keeps producing tomatoes and these are the tomatoes that we sell to keep the lights on in our main greenhouse. That's what is going on right now with online. So, if someone wants to be dismissive of online education, you're racking on something that is underfunded, and not paid enough attention to. *—Tom*

Tom's metaphor comparing BSU to a greenhouse succinctly captures the revenue generating and subsidy giving role of online offerings. The metaphor also explains how many of BSU's core functions do not generate enough revenue to cover their own expenses and therefore need subsidies to survive. Lastly, Tom's metaphor detailed the lack of attention and resources that are given to BSU's online offerings, which I further discuss in Theme Four.

Importantly, all the participants acknowledged that online offerings help to subsidize residential initiatives. While participants' views on the subsidizing role of online offerings vary, Peter sees the relationship as a positive one. Peter explains:

Well, let's not fool each other. [Online offerings] exist because it's a revenue stream for the university that we can tap into to enhance what we do. And thank God, it does exist because of what we just went through with COVID. So, it's a revenue stream for the university, but it's also an efficiency tool for the university too. *—Peter*

In addition to being a revenue stream for the university, Peter described how BSU's experience with online offerings helped streamline shifting residential education to a remote format during the pandemic.

However, not all participants are pleased with the current subsidy generating role that online offerings play for BSU. In fact, several participants expressed frustrations with the reality. Liz discussed how online programs are already at a disadvantage because they do not get to keep all their revenue. Liz explains:

I mean absolutely, maximizing profit so that it can be spent elsewhere is frustrating.

Yeah, I would love to see [us] bring in buckets of money from an online program, [but] why are we not reinvesting that in the online program? That's not usually what happens, or it doesn't happen enough. *–Liz*

Liz's frustrations are not only that the revenue from online offerings is being used to support other initiatives, but also that the revenue from online offerings is not being reinvested back into the online offering. Other participants shared similar frustrations and I further explore the lack of reinvestment into online offerings in Theme Four.

Marcus also expressed apprehension with using revenue from online offerings to pay for residential initiatives. Marcus explains:

It was also supporting some full-time people. That was a big problem. The previous couple department heads were funding office staff [who] don't do anything with our program and was paying salaries out of that, which is bad, because if the revenue is variable, you've got salary people depending on that. *–Marcus*

Admittedly, Marcus explained that his current dean no longer uses revenue from online to pay the salaries of staff who are not affiliated with the online program. However, Marcus detailed

that money from online offerings is still used to pay for expenses unrelated to online offerings.

Marcus continues:

The only things we're going to buy with this money are things that are truly temporary expenditures, like renovating offices, paying for grad student travel, [paying] summer instructors. A lot of it ends up going to graduate students in the residential program and supports summer work, like teaching classes, research, writing projects, whatever.

–*Marcus*

Marcus is more comfortable with using revenue from online offerings to pay for temporary residential expenses because if revenue from online offerings decrease, the unit has not made long-term financial commitments that it can no longer afford.

### **Online offerings follow demand**

As online offerings are used to subsidize BSU's more important core functions, online offerings have developed a stronger market focus and are much more market reactive than many of BSU's residential offerings. As previously discussed, Zemsky et al., (2005) describe a university's periphery functions to be more in tune with markets or to be more market focused than functions occurring within a university's core. Participants in every personnel role regularly referred to BSU's online offerings as being engaged within a marketplace of online higher education and most participants even expressed desires to transform institutional practices and shape BSU's online offerings to become more competitive within the marketplace. Participants were clear that BSU's current portfolio of online offerings is highly influenced by the marketplace and student demand. Student demand was commonly referred to by participants and how various institutional processes are in place to ensure market demand is understood prior to launching a new online program. Since BSU's online offerings must be financially self-

sustaining and often must generate revenue to subsidize university core functions, online offerings are particularly market aware and utilize processes to ensure and safeguard revenue generation.

### ***Market mentality***

Throughout the interviews, participants regularly referred to the marketplace of online higher education. While some participants simply acknowledged that the marketplace exists and therefore BSU needs to be informed of various market trends, other participants perceived BSU as already fully engaged within the market and expressed desires to jockey for a better or stronger position.

Marcus captured several other participants' sentiments well as he discussed his views on the online higher education marketplace. He explains:

I think as an industry, it starts from the premise of there is a market that's not reachable via campus experiences...as an industry, it starts from the premise that there is a large market available to pay tuition, needs a college degree, wants a credential, is ready for professional development of various kinds. –*Marcus*

Marcus explained that the online higher education marketplace consists of individuals who want to pursue a college degree but are unable to physically attend a college campus and there are institutions trying to remove the physical component to meet this population's needs.

Furthering Marcus' notion, Samuel discussed BSU's original intent with the online higher education market. Samuel details:

Yes. Did we originally start out as trying to take advantage of that market, that growing market of the other 67% [of students] that didn't finish by trying to help them complete?

Yeah, that's the market that we are in. That's why BSU has online programs and BSU has benefitted greatly from it. –*Samuel*

Samuel explained that BSU has online offerings because there was a market opportunity that the institution wanted to “take advantage of,” which consists of students who, for a variety of reasons outlined in the previous theme, were not being served by residential experiences.

While all participants acknowledged the marketplace exists, how they feel BSU should engage with the market varied slightly. In referring to the online higher education marketplace, Liz discussed how being knowledgeable of market trends could help BSU make more strategic decisions. She explained:

[the market] can help determine our strategic direction, you know, what are the upcoming market trends, market needs. How can we make sure our current programs meet those or develop new programs that will meet those...you know, making sure that we're really meeting student needs, that we are being student centered, that we are being fiscally responsible. –*Liz*

Liz described the market as more of a resource. BSU can use the market to learn about trends and then make more informed decisions. Wendy shares similar views:

I also think for online, obviously one of the main decision makers in terms of like what programs we can offer [is] what does the marketing report say about demand. So, if it says, yeah this is not going to be good in terms of like revenue generation, then the buck stops there. –*Wendy*

Like Liz, Wendy detailed how being informed by the market can lead to better informed decisions. Both participants admitted that the market plays a substantial role in determining what programs BSU offers online and what programs it does not offer.

Actually, all participants expressed that decisions regarding what programs are offered online should be informed by the market. Anne explained that the online higher education market is not going away anytime soon and “if you don't have good products in the market that people want, delivered in a way that they want, that's a huge, missed opportunity.”

Similarly, when asked directly if she had any concerns with programs and curriculum being designed to match the whims of the market, Tasha explains:

Not at all. I think it's what we have to do; it's what has to happen for a program to survive. Should it or shouldn't it, isn't really being discussed. It's just what has to happen and it's what students expect and what employers expect. *—Tasha*

Tasha's sentiments suggest that BSU's online offerings are not only informed by the market but they are also shaped by it in order to survive.

Courtney provided somewhat of a more conservative perspective. While she recognized the potential opportunities of aligning BSU's online offerings to the market, she acknowledged certain limitations. Courtney explains, “I don't think we should just chase everything. If there is a market opportunity that isn't being met and higher ed could step in, then I think we should consider it.” Courtney further explained how the market is informative, but how BSU must also recognize its available resources and areas of expertise as decisions are made regarding market opportunities.

### ***Supply and demand***

As participants referenced the online higher education marketplace and discussed market opportunities for BSU, they regularly mentioned supply and demand. In general, the supply of the online education marketplace are the available online offerings or the institutions that provide online offerings, and the demand are the populations of prospective online students. The



relationship between BSU's online offerings and student demand was either implied or directly addressed during each interview.

Wendy discussed the supply and demand relationship when asked about how decisions are made about what programs are offered. Wendy explains:

Okay, well, I mean demand. I think that people have spoken. It's needed, it's wanted and we're giving people what they are asking for. Essentially, if there was no demand, we wouldn't be able to run our programs and so I think that's pretty much the simple answer to that question. –*Wendy*

Wendy explained how student demand is a major influence on what online offerings BSU provides. In addition to aligning online offerings to match student demand, she also explained the necessity of matching student demand for program survival.

Likewise, Courtney explained how BSU attempts to match program and course offerings with student demand.

I mean, on the whole, we would never offer a degree [online] in Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies because we know that there's not a lot of enrollment demand for that. It's successful enough [on] campus, but there is not the demand for it with our online students. I think it's a matter of what the demand is. –*Courtney*

Again, Courtney captured how BSU's online offerings are designed to meet student demand and how decisions are made to ensure offerings are not created that will have poor demand.

As discussed in Theme One, the online student population is different than the residential student population. As such, BSU's online offerings are designed to meet the specific needs of their online students. When asked about the major factors that influence decisions regarding what programs to offer, Tasha explained that meeting students' needs is paramount. Online students

are typically adults with job and family responsibilities, so “the delivery method doesn't matter as much as if we’re giving the students what they need to get a decent paying job...in the field they like or field they want to work in.” Tasha argued that much of matching student demand is understanding students’ situations and providing online offerings to meet their needs.

Peter agreed that BSU’s online offerings need to match student demand, but he feels that BSU has not done enough to ensure it is happening. He explains, “the people who decide what courses are run and what programs are offered are not familiar enough with what the market needs are to be able to make those kinds of decisions.” Peter is adamant that he and his faculty colleagues understand the market opportunity better than BSU’s marketing research team and that changes should be administered to meet the untapped student demand.

Marcus also expressed frustration with BSU’s processes for offering new online offerings because they do not allow the institution to move quickly enough to meet student demand. He explains:

It’s kind of interesting because to launch a new program you have to do a market study.

You have to try to get an understanding of the demand for the new program, and if you're ahead, the demand's not necessarily going to be there. –*Marcus*

Here, Marcus revealed the delicate balance between anticipating student demand and BSU’s online offerings. In order to be a leader in the field, Marcus attempts to anticipate future student demand, however BSU’s processes require proof of sufficient student demand in order to launch a new program. “Yes, it's like this bizarre chicken and egg discussion,” Marcus explains, “they're like we did a market search, and we don't see many degrees like this, and I’m like, of course you don’t, that's my point!” The processes embedded within BSU require market studies to determine

the level of demand for certain programs, however Marcus believes strongly that BSU “is not progressive” and is “just backward” in how it operates. Marcus continues:

I don't know, like, come on, guys, this is like wildly uncreative. Do I really have to say this? We would be like one of the first ones [to offer the program] ...and like they will mention the lack of competitor programs and that you haven't conferred that many degrees. I'm like, yeah, you wouldn't, there aren't too many because these are new. It's like they want to see that there's a bunch of people already getting the degree first. Why would we even do it then? –*Marcus*

BSU's processes attempt to match student demand with their online offerings, however participants like Peter and Marcus believe BSU is too risk averse by wanting to see proof of demand before committing institutional resources.

Participants' perceptions of the relationship between BSU's online offerings and the online higher education marketplace suggests BSU's online offerings are positioned on the periphery of the institution. Furthermore, the dependency on market forces, such as student demand, and the influence it has in shaping BSU's online portfolio of offerings, implies online offerings serve more of a peripheral role for the institution.

### **Discrepancies across personnel roles**

The findings in the above sections highlight shared sentiments from participants from each personnel role, however, minor discrepancies were identified across personnel roles. For example, while each participant agreed that online offerings were more market focused and influenced by forces of supply and demand, participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role expressed greater frustration with BSU's bureaucracy and processes than the other personnel roles. Tenure-track faculty who teach online participants seemed more

sensitive to market forces and expressed annoyance that BSU's online offerings were not nimbler and more innovative in the marketplace.

Participants in the administration personnel role were less optimistic than participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role when discussing new program ideas. Instead, administration participants focused more on leveraging BSU's current portfolio of online offerings and exploring opportunities to enhance poorer performing offerings. These participants were also the only group to discuss analyzing enrollment data and student success metrics to make decisions about what offerings to continue providing in future semesters.

Participants in the third space professional personnel role expressed that much of the current positioning of online offerings is due to the faculty tenure model. Third space professional participants argued that one of the reasons why negative or lesser than views of BSU's online offerings persist is because tenured faculty do not largely support online education. Third space professional participants also provided more examples than the other two personnel groups of how courses and programs have been altered to increase student demand and student success.

### **Theme Two Summary**

Participants expressed sentiments that BSU has core and periphery functions and roles. Participants detailed sentiments that online offerings are viewed as lesser or as one of the university's extra endeavors. Even though participants detailed the mission alignment of online offerings in increasing student access, as outlined in Theme One, participants acknowledged that online offerings still fail to be viewed as equal to BSU's residential offerings. As a lesser, peripheral function, online offerings seek out opportunities to generate revenue that the core functions of the university can then utilize. Additionally, as a periphery function, online offerings

are not subsidized beyond an initial start-up period and are expected to be financially self-sustaining after a couple of years. Net revenues from online offerings are then used to subsidize other university initiatives. As such, BSU's online offerings are much more market focused and influenced by supply and demand forces than residential offerings. This market mentality further supports positioning online offerings on the peripheries of the university (Zemsky et al., 2005).

### **Theme 3: Online as a Revenue Stream**

Now that I've discussed how BSU's online offerings exist on the university's periphery, fulfill a supporting role by subsidizing core functions, and embrace a market mentality, I will highlight the subsequent realization and what participants expressed as the major focus of online offerings: the generation of net revenue. While Theme Two highlighted how BSU's online offerings are more market sensitive in order to align offerings with market demand to increase enrollment and generate revenue, Theme Three details how the focus on revenue generation is integrated into internal discussions and decisions regarding BSU's online offerings. Specifically, I will discuss how participants viewed access to a new revenue stream as major incentive for launching online offerings and remains as a central purpose and primary function of online offerings. I also detail how, due to BSU's online offerings' position on the periphery and core subsidizing role, net revenue generation is an expectation of online offerings. Additionally, while online offerings produce other benefits apart from revenue generation, which fall more on the mission side of the mission/market spectrum, I discuss how these benefits are only enjoyed and further pursued if online offerings are financially self-sustaining and fulfilling their subsidizing role for the university's core functions. Lastly, in addition to ensuring online offerings fulfill their subsidizing role, I discuss participant perceptions of how decisions are made to further maximize net revenue produced by online offerings.

### **The necessity of net revenue**

Throughout the interviews, when discussing the primary purpose of online offerings at BSU, most participants expressed that increasing student access was the primary function. Several participants articulated that student access was most important, but that online offerings also needed to generate revenue. When asked specifically about the primary function of online offerings, not one participant argued it was to generate revenue. However, in discussing their experiences, the initial rationale for launching online offerings, and what they and the rest of the university expect from online offerings, the relationship between online offerings and new net revenue was prominent. Increases in net revenue is not only an expectation for online offerings, but also the primary reason BSU first launched online offerings. Revenue was and remains the most influential factor in decisions to launch, continue, change, or sunset online offerings at BSU.

### ***Revenue an incentive for launching online offerings***

The relationship between BSU's online offerings and increases in net revenue is not new. In fact, several participants remembered the first offerings that BSU offered online and the rationale behind the decision. Courtney explains:

The original motivator for online was obviously an opportunity to generate revenue. I was here before there was [online offerings] and the original pitch that the university made to the academic units to incentivize them to take that risk in online education was that there would be revenue. So, I think it's very safe to say that revenue was an incentive offered by the university to jump start [online offerings]. But the other thing is...some colleges never received enough money from the university to offer their programs in

residence. So, they relied on making money from the online delivery unit so they can serve the enrollment needs at main campus. –*Courtney*

Courtney recalled there initially being resistance by academic units to launch online offerings. As outlined in Theme Two, many faculty were hesitant to launch online offerings because they were concerned that online degrees were unbecoming of BSU and would tarnish the institution's reputation. To gain the support of academic units, the revenue structure of BSU was purposefully designed so that a portion of the revenue generated by online offerings would be shared with the academic unit that housed the online program. Courtney explained how the initial pitch to convince academic partners to try online education used the potential revenue stream from online offerings as an incentive.

Jim's recollection is quite similar. He explained how many were reluctant to try online offerings for the same reasons Courtney provided. However, he also discussed the monetary risks associated with venturing into the online space. Jim explains:

Yeah, I know that there was a money aspect too. I mean, I know that online would have never started if it wasn't going to make money. I know that was a major selling point at the time. I know a lot of people didn't want to do online; a lot of people still don't like online and see it as a waste of time or a cheaper version of a degree. The money part was a big selling point. No one wanted to use their own money or take money away from something else to do it.... because colleges get a certain amount of money every year to pay for staff and faculty and what not. No one wanted to take on this big new online expense. So, from the beginning it needed to at least cover costs, but everyone was hoping it would do better than that. –*Jim*

Jim explained that academic units did not want to subsidize online offerings and how the expectation that online offerings needed to at least be financially self-sustaining was originally integrated into BSU's online offerings' identity.

While Jim discussed the financial risk of online offerings and how the risk resulted in designing and expecting online offerings to be self-sustaining, Tasha detailed how the focus on revenue and associated risks further separated BSU's residential and online offerings. Tasha explains:

Yeah, I feel like the pressure, not the pressure...the expectation. I think it goes back to the initial expectations that were set when online started. Residential instruction was already happening, and everyone was good with it. Online was seen as completely separate, no connection or impact on residential. It was a way to make money. Yes, students would learn and gain access, but there was an expectation that it would make money. *—Tasha*

Tasha's account not only supports the notion that BSU's online offerings operate on the periphery as detailed in Theme Two, but how the focus on making money was built into the identity and original purpose of online offerings, which she detailed as a distinguishing characteristic between residential and online offerings.

Mark offered a similar perspective on how BSU's online offerings are distinct from residential offerings. Mark explains:

One of the reasons for standing [online offerings] up is to generate a new revenue stream that is separate and distinct from the kind of standard enrollment revenue model that comes from residential programs. I'm not a cynic by natural bent, but I think one of the reasons that online education exists is that we live in a capitalist economy and the



existing old revenue model of higher education was breaking down, and that institutions like ours needed to find another revenue stream to stay alive. –*Mark*

Mark described BSU's online offerings as more of a side venture, or a way to generate extra income that can be used to cover the university's expenses.

Likewise, when discussing why BSU's online offerings seem to be more revenue focused than its residential programs, Tom explains:

Oh, it's by design. No one was excited to do online at first. Online was this weird thing that only for-profits were doing. The reason online took off is because it was pitched as a way to make money. I don't think anyone in the administration is ignorant enough to think that BSU has online offerings solely for the academic mission of the school. Online exists to make money, period. –*Tom*

While Tom arguably holds more cynical views than some of the other participants, the revenue generating purpose of BSU's online offerings was discussed in every interview. This foundational purpose and rationale for launching online offerings has certainly shaped perceptions of online offerings and is arguably largely responsible for the prevalent expectation that online offerings continue to generate net revenue.

### ***Revenue is expected***

While new net revenue generation was an incentive and arguably the primary rationale for launching BSU's online offerings, the expectation that online offerings continue to generate net revenue persists to this day. Every participant commented on the need for online offerings to generate revenue and provided evidence that suggests revenue generation remains a prominent expectation for BSUs online offerings.

Julie described revenue generation as a central purpose to why online offerings exist. She explains:

Residential programs have been what we do forever. Online is new so it's scrutinized more. Everyone also sees online as an extension of residential and in particular an extension that will make money. So, if it's not making money then it's not achieving its purpose. –*Julie*

Julie's account identifies revenue generation as the purpose of online offerings. By saying online offerings are not achieving their purpose if they do not make money, there is an inherent expectation that online offerings will make money.

Participants also expressed views that BSU's online programs are seen as money makers for the university. Tasha explains that academic departments view them as "revenue generators," and Anne explains that "there's definitely the expectation that online is a revenue generator." Liz detailed that academic departments launched online programs expecting them to be financially self-sustaining, but soon realized they could be profitable. Now, Liz explains, online offerings "are used to the money," and everyone expects them to continue making it.

Jim also discussed the expectation that online offerings continue to generate new net revenue. When asked if he ever experiences pressure to generate revenue, Jim detailed the following:

Oh, yeah. I've definitely heard that from the administration and our dean's office that any program should at the very least break even, if not make some money. Their expectation is no deficit. But there are a couple programs that make money and I do feel pressure to keep that money coming in. –*Jim*

The expectation and pressure placed on Jim to continue to generate revenue was also expressed by other participants and will be further explored in Theme Four.

Marcus also commented on the pressure to make money from online offerings. He explains:

The pressure will be pretty explicit in some cases where it's like we need to reduce the headcount of your faculty this year because we don't think you've made enough money last year. So that can be pretty explicit. It's usually more implied. Yeah, senior administrators are reluctant to say things out loud about these kinds of things...for example, a way that this manifests is in the feedback that I might get in a review from the dean's office. They would frequently mention things like 'good job bringing in all that money...it's amazing.' So that's a non-subtle hint. –*Marcus*

Both Jim and Marcus feel their college's administration expects them to continue to generate revenue and both referenced the added pressure these expectations place on them.

In a similar vein, Liz discussed how the pressure to meet the revenue generating expectation only increases as programs make more money. Liz explains:

Absolutely, they get used to the money, they know that in the first few years a program launches we're going to be recouping costs, but once it gets into the flow, and most of our programs are more mature now, yeah, they get used to the money...last year we made X amount, we'd like to at least make X amount this year... this is a big focus of theirs, and they want as much net revenue as possible and it can be a real juggle. –*Liz*

Liz explained if online programs exceed revenue generating expectations, then the department's expectations will only increase in future years. However, Liz also described that programs that fail to meet expectations are more likely to face scrutiny from administrators.

In discussing the role of online offerings, Samuel provided the following, which succinctly captures and conveys the revenue generating expectation of BSU's online offerings.

Samuel explains:

Whether right or wrong, I know a lot of the university views online as a cash cow. For example, university leadership tasked the online delivery unit to generate an increase of 26 million dollars over the next three years. So, whether you want to cut costs or increase revenue, the administration was pretty clear that the role of online education is to generate revenue...and its interesting because online is making a lot of money, but all of the money is being spent. So, it's not like the university is sitting on a stockpile of online money, its being spent almost as fast as it is coming in and that only increases the expectation that online continues to be profitable. –*Samuel*

Samuel's perception is that the university is looking to its online offerings to generate new net revenues. As online offerings fulfill their role and establish themselves as revenue generators, the university's demands only ever increase.

### **Online produces many benefits but revenue is critical**

Accessing new revenue streams and increasing the university's net revenue is so intricately woven into the purpose of online offerings that decisions shaping the online portfolio are largely influenced by the amount of net revenue an offering generates. Additionally, the university uses the amount of net revenue produced by a program as a primary measurement of program success, and decisions are regularly made to adjust the online portfolio to maximize revenue generation. As outlined in Theme One, online offerings also afford numerous benefits that are in alignment with the institution's educational mission and further support BSU's land-grant mission. However, participants stressed that decisions regarding the online portfolio were

largely financially based and focused on revenue generation. As such, this section details how the many mission-aligned benefits of BSU's online offerings are secondary, or products of successful attempts to generate revenue through its online offerings.

### ***Revenue vs. mission-aligned benefits***

Participants were adamant that BSU's online offerings produced many benefits that typically fall on the mission side of the mission/market spectrum. However, due to the revenue generating purpose of BSU's online offerings, these mission-aligned benefits are only garnered if online offerings are successful in meeting the revenue generating expectation.

Julie's experiences capture the relationship between revenue and mission-aligned benefits well. She explains:

The demand is there, but somehow there's a mismatch between the demand and the number of students that we're getting. So, we're having to run our programs with fewer students. Do I think that the program should be cut because we don't have the number we want? No, I don't. I think that we need to keep offering the program even if it doesn't make money. The program is too important, but getting cut is a real concern if the money isn't there. And if it gets cut, which would be a big mistake, simply because the numbers aren't there. Then those students are going to have go someplace else. So, we just need to find out and do something about it. –*Julie*

Julie explained how important the program is and how it is meeting students' educational needs, even if the number of students is smaller than she would like. However, these benefits are at risk since the program might not generate adequate revenue. Even though Julie believes cutting the program would be a "big mistake," it remains a "real concern" if the program does not generate enough money.

Marcus provided similar sentiments between the mission benefits his program offers and the revenue generating role his program must fulfill. In detailing what he sees as the purpose of his program, Marcus explains:

It's got a few different major components. I am mandated to do two things together. One is to operate the most excellent quality online program anywhere, right? We're BSU. This should be the top choice that people aspire to. So, quality and reputation being very, very important, and then a parallel, and oftentimes more important to be frank, and a concern, is to generate enough interest and enrollments in our program such that there is a significant amount of net tuition revenue that flows back into the department as discretionary income at the end of each year. –*Marcus*

Marcus described the mission-aligned benefits and the revenue generating purpose as being pursued simultaneously but explained he feels revenue generation is the more important of the two. Marcus continues:

And to be honest with you, people like to say that they care a lot about graduates having a wonderful impact on the world and things like that, but if you don't make enough money to make your shop operate in the black, then people forget about [it], the altruistic vision of the university melts away. –*Marcus*

Here, Marcus detailed while the mission and market purposes of online offerings are pursued simultaneously, the market purpose is the primary focus. For Marcus, the mission focus is only pursued if his program is producing net revenue.

Like Marcus, Peter's perception is that generating revenue is more important than the mission-aligned benefits his program provides to students. Peter explains:

There's certainly a relationship between revenue and online and increasing student access through online and increased revenue. I guess the main thing here to focus on would be if online would exist if it didn't make money. Yes, it increases access, but if it only increased access and didn't make money, I don't think you'd see schools doing it. There is a business aspect here that you can't get away from no matter how mission focused you are. But if it wasn't profitable, we wouldn't do it. We wouldn't even be having this conversation. –*Peter*

Peter's perception is that BSU's online offerings exist to generate revenue, first and foremost, but he recognized that many other benefits come from online offerings. However, if an online program failed to generate revenue, the program, along with all of its mission-aligned benefits would be cut. For Peter, this clearly places more importance on revenue generation than any of the other benefits.

In discussing how success of online offerings is measured, Wendy detailed that revenue is a major contributor, possibly even more so than student success. "I'm not saying they don't care about student success," Wendy explains, "I absolutely think [they] do, but I think revenue is the big driver and is one of the ways, probably one of the most important ways in which they measure success." Wendy stressed the great work her students do and the positive impact they have after they graduate. However, in determining how successful her program is, she does not believe BSU values either of these mission-aligned benefits more than it values the amount of revenue the program generates.

However, Julie's experiences offer somewhat of a more balanced approach. In discussing how her online programs are evaluated, Julie explains:

The program is reviewed in terms of quality, all our programs are. We are committed to offering quality education in all modalities, but I do know the ability to make a profit and having market demand is definitely a factor. —*Julie*

Julie and several other participants discussed program quality and explained how university processes are in place to ensure all courses and programs adhere to specific standards to safeguard quality. However, like Julie, these same participants also discussed the need for online offerings to generate revenue.

While some participants expressed perceptions that online offerings' primary focus is to generate revenue, other participants believe online offerings' purpose is more of a balance between generating revenue and providing more mission-aligned benefits, although most of these participants mentioned the market purpose seemed to outweigh the mission focus. Importantly, not a single participant discussed the purpose of online offerings as independent from revenue generation.

### ***Decisions to maximize revenue***

Participants also repeatedly discussed attempts to maximize the revenue produced by BSU's online offerings. In addition to participants feeling like revenue generation was a major purpose of online offerings, they also provided numerous examples of how BSU utilizes online offerings to generate revenue and detailed how changes to the online portfolio are implemented to increase or maximize revenue. The two most common decisions discussed by participants that influence BSU's portfolio of online offerings are deciding what programs to launch and deciding what programs to cut.

Mark explained that BSU regularly reviews its current online offerings to determine which programs are making money and which programs are losing money. According to Mark,



“if the program is a loss leader, BSU needs to say, ‘are they worth continuing?’” When asked if he knows of any online offerings that have been allowed to continue while operating at a loss, Mark replied, “no, not to my knowledge.” While none of the participants explicitly said the decision to cut a program is completely dependent on whether the program makes money, several participants made very strong suggestions to that end.

For example, in discussing what would happen if an online offering was not making money, Julie details:

If it's been up and running and it's reached [the] break-even point, and now it should be making money and it's not, I'd be asking a lot of questions like, are the courses not what [they] need to be in that particular discipline? Is it not what the students need? Because in the first few years, yeah, an online program should lose money and that should be an expectation. But when you reach the break-even [point] and if it's not making money, then you really have to ask some serious questions. –*Julie*

Julie detailed the expectation for online offerings to generate revenue after its first few years and how she would ask questions to identify the issues and then look to make changes if a program was not making money.

However, several participants provided even stronger responses than Julie. For example, when discussing whether an online offering would be allowed to continue if it regularly lost money, Anne explained, “I can't imagine too many would be left to go on too long if they were losing money, which is really interesting because a lot of resident programs are so far in the hole it is unfathomable.” Similarly, when I asked Jim if he knew of any online offerings that were allowed to continue operating at a deficit, he replied, “No. Every one that I know that runs at a

deficit has been cut.” Lastly, in discussing the process used to determine how successful online offerings are, Courtney explains:

I mean [for] online we've always looked at it from a program level. The program itself...we look at the enrollments in that program itself, knowing that [upper] level courses are going to have fewer enrollments than [lower] level and sometimes their instructional costs are higher, which hurts revenue too. But nothing is going to be maintained if we find out it's losing money. –*Courtney*

All these examples support the notion that generating revenue is a major focus of BSU’s online offerings and failure to generate revenue greatly increases the likelihood offerings will be cut.

Decisions regarding what online offerings to launch are also greatly influenced by the online offering’s revenue generating potential. In discussing the process for creating a new program, Wendy explains:

There first needs to be buy-in, meaning the dean and the online delivery unit. Then, they have to do [a] marketing report to say, you know, is it going to make money? If the report comes back and says it won’t, then basically it kind of stops there. If it says it will [make money] that’s when we start talking about what's this going to cost, what are the additional courses that we're going to have to create to make this program? Then, if we think it will still make money, it will move forward. –*Wendy*

Wendy’s description of the process to launch a new online program places net revenue generation as a central focus. Processes are in place to ensure there is sufficient market demand for the program to make money and proposals for new programs are rejected if demand is lacking.

Jim also provided his thoughts on the decision-making process for launching new online offerings. When asked why some online offerings are approved and some are denied, he provided an insightful perspective. Jim explains:

Even in residence, most doctoral programs run at a deficit. But they help increase the reputation of the university, [they] expand our reach in giving access to students. But doctoral programs aren't being offered online. There might be one or two that have squeaked by, but for the most part we don't have online doctorates. Some say it's because doctoral courses are more rigorous or the research component needs to be in person, but we offer masters online and they are doing research and publishing. I think for doctorates, the biggest reason is because they cost much more money than they bring in. You aren't going to make any money on an online Ph.D. *–Jim*

Jim's perspective is that the decision to launch an online offering is dependent on whether the offering is expected to make money. Regardless of residential doctoral programs continuing to operate at a deficit, Jim does not believe the same leniency is afforded to online doctoral programs.

On a more micro level, Tom discussed his decision-making process involving what online courses to offer each semester. He explains:

In my role there's no way I'd run a course if I knew we were going to lose money on it, because I don't want to show that it's costing more to run this course than it is to not. So yeah, I'm always doing a cheer when we have enough students in a course because I always feel bad for the students when I cancel [a course], but I just can't show I'm losing money. *–Tom*

Even at the individual course level, Tom explained how he is cognizant of the financial break-even point and will not run a course if it will lose money. While enforcing a minimum student headcount for a course is common practice across higher education institutions, when asked if BSU's residential courses enforce a minimum headcount for courses to run, Tom provided, "yeah, all courses do, at least to my knowledge, but we set online higher...it depends on the course, but it's not uncommon for online to be twice as high." Setting minimum course headcounts at a higher number helps increase the tuition revenue produced by a class. The costs to run the course will stay flat, but more students mean more revenue. Setting minimum course headcounts at a higher number serves as another example of decisions to maximize revenue from online offerings.

### **Discrepancies across personnel roles**

The findings in the above sections highlight common perceptions by participants from each personnel role, however, minor discrepancies were identified across personnel roles. For example, participants in the third space professional personnel role seemed to experience the greatest amount of pressure to generate revenue from online offerings. Third space professional participants shared examples of how they equated their job performance to the amount of money made by their online offering.

Participants in the third space professional personnel role seemed more knowledgeable of the associated costs of launching a new online offering. Participants in this role provided examples of proposals for new online offerings submitted by faculty members who seemed unaware of the start-up costs or the start-up period. A couple third space professional participants explained they have had to push back on several proposals because the start-up costs were unaccounted for and were much higher than outlined in the proposal.

Participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role held more opposing sentiments. They more often expressed frustration that their proposals for new online offerings were rejected. Although most of these accounts placed blame on the team performing the market research than on their program's third space professional. Tenure-track faculty who teach online participants provided examples where they strongly believe there are opportunities for BSU to launch new programs they feel will be in high demand. However, when the market research reveals there is not sufficient demand to justify launching the program, the participants proceed to point out the issues with the market research approach. The tenure-track faculty who teach online participants explained the market research resembles benchmarking research more than anything else; it identifies market demand in terms of how many similar degrees are being awarded by other institutions. The tenure-track faculty who teach online participants argued this research approach stymies BSU's attempts to be visionary, innovative, or leaders in the online education space.

Tenure-track faculty who teach online participants also spoke more highly of the mission-aligned benefits of BSU's online offerings. While they certainly detailed the need for online offerings to generate revenue, they provided more balanced perceptions compared to participants in the other two personnel roles. Furthermore, tenure-track faculty who teach online participants discussed the focus on generating revenue as the result of external pressures and not something that originated from within the academic unit.

Participants in the administration personnel role seemed to assume BSU's online offerings are of higher quality than compared to participants in other personnel roles. Therefore, administration personnel participants were more approving of measuring an offering's success by focusing on its revenue generation. Participants in both of the other personnel roles provided

examples of poorly designed and questionable quality online offerings, but participants in the administration role stated all of BSU's online offerings are reviewed for quality by the same processes used for residential offerings.

Lastly, participants in the administration personnel role provided more context to BSU's budget structure as a major reason why so much attention is directed to online offerings' revenue generation. They provided examples of how the revenues from online offerings were originally designed as funds that were separate from the rest of academic units' budgets, which has contributed to the institution's focus on revenue from its online offerings.

### **Theme Three Summary**

Participants in every personnel role expressed perceptions that generating revenue is a major focus of BSU's online offerings. Many of these perceptions are influenced by BSU originally pitching online offerings to academic units as a way to secure a new revenue stream. More than 20 years later, the financial incentive for launching online offerings remains a central purpose and primary function of BSU's online offerings. Accordingly, participants perceive that online offerings are expected to generate revenue and changes should be made if an online offering does not generate sufficient revenue. Participants also detailed many of the mission-aligned benefits afforded by online offerings. While participants believe these benefits are valuable and worth pursuing, they ultimately can only be realized if online offerings are financially self-sustaining and fulfilling their subsidizing role for the university's core functions. To this end, participants provided accounts of decisions that shape BSU's online portfolio with the goals of either reducing expenses or maximizing revenue.

#### **Theme 4: Net Revenue vs Quality**

Having discussed the need for BSU's online offerings to be financially self-sustaining, and in many cases the expectation that online offerings will generate net revenue to subsidize core functions of the university, participants discussed the balance or tension between decisions to maximize revenue and decisions to invest in quality. In Theme Three, participants provided examples of how decisions to launch and decision to cut online offerings are largely influenced by revenue. In this theme, I highlight examples provided by participants of decisions to forego investing in improving the quality of online offerings in order to further maximize net revenues that can be spent on initiatives unrelated to online offerings. Additionally, I discuss how participants view these decisions as predicated and justified by a good enough mentality that governs the quality of BSU's online offerings and further supports revenue maximization. When online courses are viewed as good enough, additional investment in quality is not necessary, which lowers expenditures and maximizes net revenue. Liz captured this relationship between net revenue and investment in quality quite well. She explains:

I think it's a problem because it incentivizes revenue over quality. Decisions are made to not invest in quality because it's expensive and would mean that money can't be spent doing other things. So, it creates this model where online is about generating as much revenue as possible and tries to cut as much expense as possible. Unfortunately, I think the quality is what suffers. *–Liz*

Although participants' perceptions differ regarding the extent that quality suffers, all participants referenced the tension between increasing net revenues and investing in online offerings.

### **Lack of investment in online offerings**

Ensuring and maintaining high quality online offerings can be expensive, and decisions are sometimes made to not invest or to limit investment in online quality to reduce expenditures, which allows for more revenue to be spent on core activities. According to participants, there is a common perception that BSU does not regularly invest finances to improve or enhance its online offerings. In discussing the revenue generated by his program, Marcus explains, “there is no explicit reinvestment into the online program.” He added, the costs associated with running and delivering the program are covered by the revenue that the program brings in, however, any additional funds are returned to the academic unit. Marcus expressed frustration with BSU’s budgetary processes and detailed how improving the program is always a challenge because he only has enough money “to keep the lights on,” and it’s a fight to get any additional investment from the academic unit.

### ***Quality is expensive***

One of the complications with enhancing online offerings in terms of their quality is it tends to be expensive. In talking about BSU’s online offerings and the processes used to launch new programs and make changes to current offerings, Peter explains, “I think online needs to make money and if you didn’t know this, starting a new program is really expensive. Actually, even making changes [or] course revisions are expensive.” While Peter touched on the associated costs of starting programs and revising courses, he also explained BSU’s online programs need to make money. If the costs of launching programs or revising courses are so great the online offering will not be profitable, then it fails to achieve its purpose.

Anne also shared how the associated costs of improving online courses deters investment. She explains:



I don't think our classes are where they need to be yet in terms of their quality...that's because they were created based on lectures in the classroom. Now a lot of what we do online is so much more than recorded lectures, but we don't really innovate...it's expensive for one, and we don't have the time or money for two, and no one really wants us to. Well, I think people would be happy to reap the benefits of better courses, but no one wants to put in the time or money to get there. *–Anne*

While Anne admitted that BSU's online courses are not "where they need to be yet in terms of their quality," she explained that online offerings are just one of many functions within BSU that are competing for finite resources and there is not enough desire to prioritize improving quality.

Likewise, Tom shared his perception that BSU's online offerings are lacking in quality because the institution has not prioritized improving them. He explains:

Developing a really good online course takes time and iteration. It takes a financial investment. Residential faculty get a course release when they are redesigning a residential course. That's not something that is guaranteed for online [faculty]. We have to fight for that every time, and the sad thing is that the online courses are the ones that desperately need to be redesigned. The bottom line with everything is garbage in, garbage out. If you have a real good online class with really good discussion prompts that organically motivates the students to engage and learn and discover, that can be a great experience. If you design the course where students are engaging with each other and learning from each other's contributions, that to me is just as good as any experience. Now do our courses do that yet? No. We haven't had the time, energy, money, or direction to put into that. *–Tom*

Tom stressed the need for financial investment to improve his online courses while mentioning his courses are not where he would like them to be in terms of quality. Tom also highlighted a difference between BSU's online and residential offerings in that residential faculty receive a course release for redesigning a course, which allows for more time and attention to be given to the course revision. Tom continues:

If online learning is not good, it might be because of the situation that produced it. You can't put nothing into something and expect a lot out of it. Right? That's a fantasy, nothing in but getting tons out. I don't have to be a physicist to know that that's not how energy works. –*Tom*

If BSU's online offerings are lacking in quality, as many participants have stressed, then the situation that produced the courses should be examined. Tom believes the situation at BSU is one that does not prioritize improving the quality of online offerings.

Wendy provided a more detailed perspective at the course level on lack of investment in quality because it was deemed too expensive. In discussing some of the issues she's experienced with online students plagiarizing, she explains:

In terms of plagiarism, I think the easy solution is to incorporate Turnitin or one of those other similar services into every single submission. And we actually inquired about that, but it's cumbersome to add it into every single assignment. Like, an instructional designer actually has to manually do that for every single course, every single assignment and that was just going to be way too much money. There is a solution, it just currently takes too much time and money. –*Wendy*

Wendy went on to explain that her courses do use Turnitin for a few larger assignments, but the decision to utilize it for all submissions was not an expense that could be justified.

Samuel also shared his thoughts on how expensive improving the quality of BSU's online courses can be. He suggested BSU only recently started to invest in improving the quality of online courses because it is receiving fewer new students, which increases pressure to keep the students who are already enrolled. Samuel explains:

One last thing I will say that will be quite controversial is that right now there is a big focus on student retention. Up to this point the online market wasn't fully tapped. We were focused on increasing applications. Let's get as many students in as we can. Let's make as much money as we can. Everyone at BSU was so happy with the growth of online, but do you know that the graduation rate was around 30 percent? Can you imagine a residential program operating with a 70 percent dropout rate? But it was allowed to continue. Everyone talks about this period of time as some golden era, but we weren't graduating students. Sure, attempts were made to improve things, but they didn't amount to much. Improving student retention is really hard and a lot of time and money have to go toward it. Now that applications are declining, everyone is more focused on keeping the students we have so we are finally starting to have those conversations.

*–Samuel*

Samuel perceives of BSU's decision to invest in improving online offerings as a financial one. The costs associated with improving quality were historically too high, which resulted in decisions to focus on increasing applicants instead of retaining students. However, as BSU receives fewer applications for its online offerings, Samuel believes the higher cost initiatives to improve quality are now worth exploring.

*Expenses take away from net revenue*

While participants were adamant that improving the quality of online courses is expensive, it's too simplistic to suggest participants believe improving quality is not pursued solely because of the high price. Participants perceive decisions to not invest in quality as attempts by academic units to reduce expenditures and net as much revenue as possible. This is not to say that participants believe academic units are stockpiling revenue or are participating in lavish spending. On the contrary, any excess revenues are spent subsidizing activities deemed as important but not financially self-sustaining. In this sense, any additional expense related to online offerings, such as course revisions, course releases for faculty, purchasing and implementing plagiarism software, or any other endeavors to improve quality, reduces the amount of net revenue that can be spent on other activities.

In discussing actions by academic units to increase net revenues and reduce the costs associated with online offerings, Liz explains:

God, I could give you a million examples. I'm brought ideas for new online programs and new courses all the time because a department thinks it's going to be a big cash cow to support the other work of their department. My colleagues are fabulous, but I get the money thing, either to increase revenue or to maximize revenue and those would be the examples I gave you where they don't want to invest in a course revision or in more robust support for a course because they know it will cost them money and they want more net revenue, they don't want to have more expenses. *–Liz*

Liz understands that online offerings are used to generate revenue to subsidize the “other work” of academic units. Therefore, she's not surprised by the reluctance to invest in online course quality because it will increase expenses and decrease net revenue. Liz continues:

Don't we all want to see if there [are] ways to reach our students even more, make our courses even more engaging, make our classrooms even more active, you know help our students reach those learning outcomes even easier, make the learning stick even better? You know, that's just not going to happen. Each unit only has so much money to spend and if a course isn't in dire need of revision, the money goes elsewhere. *–Liz*

Liz believes that her colleagues do care about students and there is a desire to improve BSU's online offerings. However, she understands the constraints of finite resources and how they force units to make difficult decisions about where to spend money. Liz does not perceive online offerings to be a top contender for investment unless it is "in dire need of revision."

In discussing attempts to reduce expenses to maximize net revenue generated by online offerings, several participants highlighted faculty and faculty pay. For example, Jim explained that many online offerings use adjunct or part-time faculty to reduce expenditures. Jim explains:

Part of why we hire part-time faculty is...it's a cost saver over hiring full-time faculty. So, the goal is to generate revenue. So that's why we use part time faculty...where we know that full-time faculty do a better job teaching, I mean it's their profession, so you would expect them to do a better job than a part-time faculty. That's not to say that there aren't good part-time faculty, and we have a lot of good part-time faculty. But yeah, there's definitely a revenue choice there. You know, we make more money if we use part-time faculty. *–Jim*

Jim believes part-time faculty are used to help decrease expenses even though he believes part-time faculty are generally not as good as full-time faculty. Tom also shared his perception that part-time faculty are used to lower expenses. He explains:

I mentioned the cost to redesign a course and how that is avoided because it eats into profits, but I'd also say it's much more foundational than we realize. For example, who teaches residential and who teaches online? Tenure track, research focused, renown faculty teach residential, and a lot of adjunct part-time instructors teach online. Who do you think gets paid more? –*Tom*

For transparency, BSU has moved to limit the percentage of part-time faculty that are permitted to teach online courses, however both Tom and Jim expressed that BSU's online offerings still utilize more part-time faculty than its residential offerings to decrease expenses and increase net revenue.

While most participants provided examples of decisions to not invest in online to decrease expenses, Marcus gave an example of an investment in the quality of his program and the resulting pressure to still generate plenty of excess revenue. He explained that securing advisors for his students is a constant challenge, but it's one he feels helps elevate his program. Marcus explains:

We pay for our advisors. That's a place where we spend money on quality, in my opinion...over and above the bare minimum, for sure, like we wouldn't have to do that, and none of our peers at other institutions do that particular thing. That's my job. I am supposed to come up with this balance that values and emphasizes quality that keeps us sustainable. I've figured out what I really have to do, and I try to do it every year, and at the end of the [year], I better be delivering a big chunk of money. –*Marcus*

Marcus detailed that he is permitted to spend money to improve the quality of his program, but the expectation that his program generates revenue persists. Marcus' ability and choice to invest

in quality is predicated by his ability to also satisfy the revenue expectations from his academic unit.

Lastly, Anne succinctly captured the hesitancy to invest in quality because the added expense deters from the primary goal of maximizing net revenue from online offerings. In talking about working with academic units, Anne explains:

I mean they want to get as much of that revenue, net revenue, as possible. They won't want to see that they spent a lot on learning design support and yet that's necessary. I can very clearly argue that [it is necessary] if they want to maintain high quality programs that [have] a good reputation and keep generating revenue. And so, they will look at that line item and ask why is it that much, or I don't want it to go over X amount in a given year. They want to spend as little as they can and make as much as they can. But I don't think it can be at the detriment of the programs providing that revenue. A lot of times, if there's a cut, it will come down to the program that's making the money. —*Anne*

Anne captured how academic units tend to question investments in learning design because it's an added expense that lowers net revenue. She also summarized her perception of academic units as using online offerings to make money without an equal desire to continually invest in their quality. In fact, she even stated how investments in online offerings will be the first to be cut if net revenue is lower than expected.

### **Good enough mentality**

Having discussed the desire to maximize net revenues, which often occurs by resisting or foregoing financial investments to improve quality, I discuss how participants view these decisions as predicated and justified by a good enough mentality that governs the quality of BSU's online offerings. If the university views online offerings as revenue generators, then

improving quality is of lesser concern if revenue is being generated and minimum standards of quality are being met. The idea of the good enough mentality was communicated by Liz but also shared by other participants. Liz explains:

Teaching...this is where you're going to anonymize me...teaching takes a second seat.

And I have heard of very high up people say yeah well, I mean the teaching is good enough. High quality is expensive, so higher ups are fine with it being good enough. But in the online space, it's competitive, good enough, is not good enough. –Liz

The good enough mentality reveals contentment. When online courses are viewed as good enough, additional investment in quality is not necessary, which eliminates the need for additional expenditures which maximizes net revenue.

### ***Puppy mill status quo***

The notion of a good enough mentality reinforces the status quo. Being content or considering BSU's online offerings as good enough, validates and endorses their current state, their current quality, and their current functions. However, participants expressed concerns regarding the good enough mentality and the current status quo of BSU's online offerings. Tasha explains:

I want to be a breeder, not a puppy mill. That's how I look at it, but it is a constant fight that I have with leadership. Many online programs were created to make money. Sure, there was a minimum standard for quality, but quality wasn't the focus. Money was the focus, and it continues to be the focus for a lot of programs. –Tasha

Tasha compared BSU's online offerings to a puppy mill by arguing that money is the main focus, not quality. Instead, she explained that she strives to be a breeder by caring more about quality instead of how much money can be made.



Several participants again expressed concern at some of the faculty who teach online. Mark argued against BSU's policies outlining faculty appointments. In discussing who is eligible to teach in his program, Mark states:

I think the blinders in that [policy] are the foundational belief that only doctorly prepared people are qualified to teach graduate students at BSU and frankly I've met a lot of doctorly prepared people who aren't qualified to teach anybody. *—Mark*

Mark's frustration stemmed from some of the core differences between residential and online graduate degree programs. Mark stated that online offerings are more profession-based and career oriented, whereas many residential programs are academic and involve research. Regardless, BSU's policies tend to cater to its residential offerings, which can hold back the quality of online offerings. Instead of allowing experienced professionals to teach, BSU requires faculty to hold terminal degrees in their field. However, according to Mark, these individuals typically lack the real-work experience that would greatly improve course quality.

Anne also expressed concerns with the status quo and the faculty who teach online. Although she doesn't have authority over faculty, nor does she have a say in who is assigned to teach online courses, she knows of faculty who are teaching online who should not be. Anne explains:

But some of the shortcomings are getting faculty who might have taught in [residence] to make that transition [to online]. We have one faculty member who [is] definitely the wrong fit for this program and because of their place on campus we have no power to get them out of our program and it's really a disservice to everybody. When you are trying to deliver an agile innovative online offering and you have faculty members using cases from decades ago...and you can't do anything about it. It's really a disservice. *—Anne*

Anne's issue regarding the faculty member is that they are not contributing to a quality online experience. However, if online offerings continue to serve their primary function, addressing issues of quality, such as underperforming faculty, are of lesser concern.

Peter further supported the notion of the puppy mill status quo. In discussing why improvements have not been made in BSU's online offerings, Peter explains:

I think first and foremost decisions are made to keep the money coming in. The whole if it aint broke, don't fix it thing comes to mind. The major problem with that is that it prevents us from being nimble and innovative with our programs. *—Peter*

While Peter provided several examples of possible quality improvement opportunities in his program, he stressed that quality is only a concern if revenues start to decline. However, since his program continues to be profitable, there is not a lot of attention on how to make the program better.

Tom shared similar sentiments. In discussing why BSU has accepted the current status quo regarding its online offerings, Tom explains:

If online is making money and it's not hurting what is happening residentially, no one's going to jump up and down and try to make it better. People get used to a certain way of doing things because that's how they've always been done. So, if it's making money, no wants to challenge things and make them better. *—Tom*

While Tom sees online offerings as much more than revenue generators, he recognizes their revenue generating purpose for BSU. As such, while a minimum standard of quality is assured to protect the longevity of BSU's online offerings revenue stream, Tom does not foresee the university making any significant attempts to enhance the quality of its online offerings. Tom continues:

But let me ask you this. if you had the highest quality online program and one day enrollments dropped or the cost to offer the program soared to where it was no longer profitable. What would happen to that high quality program? Yeah, it would close or more likely it would shift to try and become profitable again. And the other side of the coin is what happens if you have an extremely profitable program, but the quality is lacking, you know, it's not the worst but it could definitely be better. In my experience, nothing. Nothing happens. Why change something that works? –Tom

Because BSU's online offerings are designed to generate revenue, attempts to improve quality are often resisted or avoided because they directly oppose online offerings' primary function. Online offerings are used to increase net revenue, whereas attempts to improve quality typically lowers net revenue. As such, participants believe the status quo of generating revenue while maintaining minimum standards of quality is secure.

### ***Online not used to innovate***

Maintaining the status quo also means that BSU does not pursue innovation with its online offerings. One of the major differences expressed by participants between BSU's residential offerings and its online offerings is that residential offerings are more concerned with teaching students how to conduct research and get published compared to online offerings. A driving force behind the residential research focus is the thought that universities should endeavor to expand the frontiers of knowledge. However, participants were adamant that BSU's online offerings do not fulfill this role for the university. In fact, participants argued that BSU is even hesitant to launch online offerings in new or emerging discipline areas that could prove lucrative. A common sentiment by participants is that BSU's online offerings are used to

generate revenue that can be expected and relied on; they are not used to explore new opportunities, take risks, or to innovate.

In discussing what changes he would like to see with BSU's online offerings, Jim said that he would like to see money reinvested in online so it could be innovative. Jim explains:

I actually think money that's made from online education should be reinvested back in online education, so that we can move forward and do innovative things. So, for instance, we could, instead of being stuck in the same, you know, course model that we've been using for twenty years, start truly getting a 2020 feel to the technology. We don't even know how good it could be because we haven't tried. *—Jim*

Jim explained that BSU's online offerings are not currently innovative. The money that is generated from online offerings help fund residential activities that tend to be more innovative and are positioned comfortably within the university's core.

Anne helped to convey the lack of innovation of BSU's online offerings. She explains that BSU's online offerings are "very risk averse. So, number one, that holds back innovation and being able to pivot." Exploring new disciplines and launching new programs requires considerable risk, especially considering the current role of online offerings at BSU. Online offerings need to make money to help pay for the expenses generated by other areas of the university. If BSU starts using online offerings to explore new fields, which entails considerable startup costs, it runs the risk of those new fields failing to cover those costs and generate a financial return. Additionally, any money allocated to launch a new program is less money that can be spent to cover other expenses.

However, Peter believes BSU is taking on more risk by not exploring new areas and being innovative with its online offerings. He explains:

We offer a lot of online programs because we know we will have students enroll in them. We aren't using online to explore new opportunities. We could really be leading in some of these fields, but we aren't trying to innovate. It's only when we start seeing enrollments drop off that anyone starts trying to make improvements or try something new and by then it's too late because other schools beat us to the punch. Online could be so much more than what it is, but that's not how we use it. *—Peter*

Peter argued that BSU's lack of innovation and willingness to explore new opportunities is hurting the university's competitive advantage within the online higher education marketplace. The notion that BSU could be a leader in new fields is in stark contrast to the good enough mentality.

Similarly, Samuel expressed frustration toward the lack of innovation regarding BSU's online offerings. Even from a strictly monetary perspective, Samuel argued the university is not leveraging online offerings effectively. In response to being asked how BSU uses online offerings, Samuel explains:

To make money, but we aren't even that smart about it. Imagine if you owned an apartment building and it's not the nicest place. You don't put in the time or money to spiff it up and as a result you're not able to charge a higher rent and your tenants aren't the best. You really only put money into it when something breaks. You're able to cover your costs and make a little profit, but no one is tripping over themselves to live there. As soon as something better comes along, you're going to lose your tenants. That's what we have right now. Now imagine if you took the time and money to turn it into something more desirable. You attract the best tenants who only increase the desirability of living there and you're able to charge more in rent, but that's not our approach to online.

–*Samuel*

In accepting the role and purpose of online offerings is to generate revenue, Samuel detailed how ineffective BSU's approach is. According to Samuel, BSU launched online offerings to generate revenue, but it has struggled to think differently about its approach because doing so would, at least initially, undermine the current purpose of online offerings.

Lastly, Marcus detailed the lack of innovation he experiences with his program compared to another area of the university that is positioned comfortably within the university's core. He explains:

I think there are individuals who do mostly get to focus on quality and innovation, and they don't worry as much about the structural sustainability of [their program]. And I'm kind of jealous of that sometimes, because I'm like, what's that like? I always think, for example, like wow, what's it like to work at the Honors College, where our whole thing is just doing cool shit. We don't even worry about money. We're always going to exist. Like, no one's going to get rid of the Honors College, it would be insane to touch it. It's easy to spend money on that because look, it's the Honors College. I wonder, from the outside, like do those folks get to just think about what cool program should we do because it's the right thing and it would be interesting? Is there ever a little voice that's like, hey, how would pay for that for ten years? –*Marcus*

Marcus highlighted several perceived differences between core and periphery functions of the university. For one, core functions are able to innovate and are often expected to do so, whereas Marcus explained he feels discouraged from innovating because it introduces risk and likely increases expenses. Later, Marcus acknowledged that even the Honor's College has budget constraints, however he argued that there is much less pressure, if any, on the Honor's College to

be financially self-sustaining, let alone generate revenue. The lack of financial pressure affords the Honor's College the freedom and flexibility to try new programs and to innovate; a luxury Marcus has not experienced with his online program.

### **Discrepancies across personnel roles**

The findings in the above sections highlight shared sentiments from participants from each personnel role, however, minor discrepancies were identified across personnel roles. The only notable differences by personnel role were in who participants generally blamed for the lack of investment in the quality of online offerings. Participants in the administration personnel role explained that many of the obstacles preventing improvements in quality were caused by faculty and academic units. Participants in the administration personnel role mentioned poor-performing faculty as a quality concern and referenced the use of online offerings by academic units to generate revenue to give faculty course releases, pay for graduate students, and fund research. However, participants in the administration personnel role seemed less interested in using online offerings to explore new disciplines and referred to these endeavors as misguided and ill-informed attempts to stand up cash cow programs.

Participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role expressed desires to improve course quality and innovate by increasing the investment in online offerings. However, participants in this role conveyed that leaders, administrators, and individuals who decide what initiatives are funded, are the reason why online offerings continue to focus on revenue generation and only address quality concerns when they are dire. Participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role were most vocal about utilizing online offerings to explore new disciplines and launch new degrees. These participants felt their

knowledge and experience in these fields should be trusted and that new offerings would be met with high student demand.

Participants in the third space professional personnel role also expressed a desire to further fund online offerings so they can improve quality. Participants in this role expressed that both faculty and administrators were responsible for the current lack of investment in online offerings. Participants in the third space professional personnel role were more open to exploring new disciplines with online offerings, but they were not as vocal or as eager as participants in the tenure-track faculty who teach online personnel role. Participants in the third space professional personnel role were most adamant about increasing the investment in online offerings to help meet the pressures to continually generate revenue.

#### **Theme Four Summary**

Although all participants believed quality improvements in BSU's online offerings could be made, investing in quality is an expensive undertaking. BSU currently relies on its online offerings to generate net revenues that can be used to subsidize activities that are unable to cover their own costs. Any additional expense incurred by online offerings reduces the net revenue that can then be used to subsidize other activities. As such, expenses, such as investments to improve the quality of online offerings, are resisted or deprioritized in order to maximize net revenue. Furthermore, the decision to not invest in the quality of online offerings is predicated and justified by a good enough mentality that governs the quality of BSU's online offerings. Even though participants identified specific examples of quality concerns related to online offerings, they detailed a common perception that BSU's online offerings are good enough and therefore additional investment in quality is not necessary. Lastly, as the purpose of online offerings is to generate revenue, online offerings are discouraged and at times prevented from innovating and



exploring new offering opportunities. Innovation and new online offerings require financial investment and introduce risk to a function that is needed to produce revenue to sustain other university initiatives.

### **Summary of Findings**

After 35 years, Clark Kerr's analogy comparing the tension within higher education institutions to that between the sacred Greek acropolis and the agora remains pertinent (Kerr, 1988). Additionally, Gordon Winston's (1999) analogy comparing the university to both a church and to a car dealership is equally relevant. A university's ability to function within the market while simultaneously pursuing its educational mission speaks to the complexities of higher education institutions.

For participants in this study, the tension Kerr (1988) refers to is observable in how BSU's online offerings provide access *for* students while simultaneously providing access *to* students. BSU is a multifaceted organization, somewhere on the hillside between the acropolis and the agora, striving to balance the need to respond to markets while remaining committed to its mission. While most participants believe BSU's online offerings accomplish both the market and mission purposes of the institution simultaneously, they perceive online offerings as serving more of a market purpose than a mission purpose for the institution. Although participants view online offerings as a function that increases educational access for students, they perceive the essential and primary function of online offerings as increasing BSU's access to new student populations.

Participants also expressed sentiments that BSU has core and periphery functions and roles (Zemsky et al., 2005). Focused largely on increasing BSU's access to new student populations, BSU's online offerings are positioned on the university's periphery and are viewed

as lesser or as one of the university's extra endeavors. These extra endeavors are tasked with seeking out opportunities to generate revenue that are then used to subsidize the university's core functions. Importantly, as a periphery function, online offerings are not subsidized beyond an initial start-up period, but they are expected to be financially self-sustaining and to fulfill their subsidizing role for the university. The periphery role and subsidization purpose create a focus on market-aligned programs that lead to revenue generation. Accordingly, participants described BSU's online offerings as being particularly market reactive and greatly influenced by supply and demand forces.

Participants also detailed how revenue generation is intrinsically tied to online offerings and was the primary rationale for BSU first launching online offerings. According to participants, generating new net revenues remains an essential function of online offerings and that changes to courses and programs do occur if online offerings fail to generate sufficient revenue. Importantly, participants also detailed many of the mission-aligned benefits online offerings produce. However, participants expressed they are essentially byproducts because they will only be realized if online offerings are financially self-sustaining and fulfilling their subsidizing role for the university's core functions.

Since BSU's online offerings are used to generate new net revenues that subsidize core functions and initiatives, reducing expenditures to maximize net revenue is an important undertaking. Any additional expense incurred by online offerings reduces the net revenues that can then be used to subsidize other activities. While all participants believe that quality improvements in BSU's online offerings could be made, investing in quality is expensive. As such, expenses to improve the quality of online offerings are resisted or deprioritized in order to maximize net revenue. Furthermore, the decisions to not invest in the quality of online offerings

is predicated and justified by a good enough mentality that governs the quality of BSU's online offerings. When online offerings are viewed as good enough, costly initiatives to further enhance offerings are easily rejected or deprioritized. Additionally, as revenue generation and subsidization of core functions is online offerings' primary role, online offerings are discouraged from innovating because it often requires financial investment, which will decrease the net revenues that can be used to sustain other university initiatives.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the study, followed by a review of the findings, the study's limitations, recommendations for future research, and lastly, a discussion of implications for research and practice.

### Overview of Study

This dissertation sought to explore how decision makers in various roles within a higher education institution perceive the purpose and role of online offerings at their institution. Additionally, this dissertation sought to understand what factors influence higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings and if and how these views differ across personnel roles within an institution. Stemming from these goals, this dissertation also aimed to understand how decision makers perceive the relationship between online offerings and other functions of higher education institutions and how the institutional logics of higher education institutions have transformed due to the emergence of online education. As such, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do online higher education decision makers perceive the purpose of online offerings?
- 2) What major factors influence online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings?
- 3) How do online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types?

Data collection primarily involved semi-structured interviews with participants and data analysis utilized Braun and Clark's (2006) inductive thematic analysis method. This approach produced four overarching themes that provide insight to the first two research questions. However,

regarding Research Question 3, data from this study suggest decision makers across different personnel roles hold similar perceptions of their institution's online offerings, which I expound on in the overview of findings section of this chapter.

### **Overview of Findings**

Four overarching themes were identified from participant interviews that suggest higher education professionals at BSU perceive online offerings as periphery functions of the university, fulfilling a subsidizing role for the university's core functions, and inherently market focused. The four themes are as follows: 1) Access is a two-way street; 2) Core versus periphery; 3) Online as a revenue stream; and 4) Net revenue versus quality.

Theme one, access is a two-way street, showed participants perceive that online offerings serve more of a market purpose than a mission purpose for the institution. While many participants convey that both the market and the mission are often pursued simultaneously, decisions are made to suggest that the market purpose is the primary function of online education and must be secure for the mission purpose to occur. The tension between BSU's online offerings providing access for students while simultaneously providing access to students was evident, however participants perceive the essential and primary function of online offerings as increasing BSU's access to new student populations.

In theme two, core versus periphery, participants expressed sentiments that BSU's online offerings are positioned on the university's periphery and are viewed as lesser or as one of the university's extra endeavors tasked with subsidizing the university's core functions. As such, BSU's online offerings must be financially self-sustaining and produce enough revenue to fulfill their subsidizing role for the university. The periphery role and subsidization purpose create a

focus on market-aligned programs with the goal of revenue generation. Accordingly, BSU's online offerings are market reactive and greatly influenced by supply and demand forces.

In theme three, online as a revenue stream, participants shared how revenue generation is innately linked to BSU's online offerings. Net new revenue generation is an essential function of online offerings and is a key indicator of a program's success. While online offerings also contribute to fulfilling BSU's educational mission, participants expressed that these efforts are secondary to revenue generation because they will only be realized if online offerings are financially self-sustaining and fulfilling their subsidizing role for the university's core functions.

In theme four, net revenue versus quality, participants conveyed that financial investments to improve the quality of online offerings are often resisted or deprioritized in order to maximize net revenue. These decisions are predicated and justified by a good enough mentality that governs the quality of BSU's online offerings. Similarly, online offerings are discouraged from innovating because it often requires additional financial investment which will decrease the net revenues that can be used to sustain other university initiatives.

A final finding is how participants across different personnel roles held similar perceptions regarding the purpose and role of online offerings. Although each participant regularly engages with online offerings and is responsible for some level of management or delivery of online courses, they were grouped by personnel role to determine if perceptions would vary across personnel roles. However, the lack of varying perceptions is worth noting. Each participant acknowledged the revenue generating role of online offerings and the need for online offerings to be financially self-sustaining. As such, each participant perceives BSU's online offerings as a periphery function. While participants understand the teaching and learning that occurs within online offerings to be mission-aligned, their perceptions of BSU's online

offerings are shaped by an overarching purpose, which is its ability to generate revenue. Although several participants expressed notions of what they would like for BSU's online offerings to become, which contradict the current state of BSU's online offerings, these notions were expressed by first acknowledging the revenue generating role of online offerings.

BSU is a multifaceted organization. To achieve its educational mission, portions of the university must participate within the market and produce resources that can then fund core activities. For BSU, online offerings are one of the market-focused functions designed to generate revenue to subsidize the more mission-focused core activities of the university. Net revenue generation is integrated into the purpose of online offerings and has shaped perceptions of online offerings. Accordingly, decisions are made to maximize net revenue by growing enrollments or by reducing expenditures, which has created an online portfolio that is intentionally market-focused and has deterred efforts to invest in quality or use online offerings to innovate.

### **Limitations & Recommendations for Future Research**

The limitations and the recommendations for future research are discussed in relation to three main aspects of the study: the campus selection, the participant groupings by personnel roles, and the timing of this research in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and budgetary changes that occurred at BSU during the data collection phase of this study. As is fitting for a single instrumental case study, I focused on one particular issue and then selected a bounded case to illustrate the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 98), and the insights gained from this study are a testament to the value of this approach. As such, the perceptions of the participants are bounded by the case and speak to their unique experiences at BSU. Similar research examining personnel spanning different higher education institutions could prove insightful in understanding

perceptions of online offerings across the broader higher education field. This research may illuminate whether the findings of this study are unique to the specific case or are shared more generally. Additionally, BSU was an early adopter of online offerings in relation to other R1 institutions. Future research may find varying perceptions of online offerings when examining institutions that more recently launched online offerings. Furthermore, future researchers should consider examining different types of institutions as well. Comparing perceptions of online offerings at community colleges or smaller, regional institutions with those of institutions with large endowments may further produce insight.

A second area of limitation is in the participant groupings by personnel role. One aim of this research was to understand how perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel type. However, the participants included in this study did not express unique perceptions according to their assigned personnel role. Each of the participants were identified for this study due to their involvement with and decision-making responsibilities regarding BSU's online offerings. However, each participant is highly engaged with the management or delivery of online offerings within the organizational context that is BSU, which may influence the similar shaping of their perceptions. Future researchers should consider examining participant perceptions with varying levels of engagement with online offerings. As a follow up to this study, future research should examine perceptions of online offerings by participants who function within the institution's core compared to participants whose roles are more within the university's periphery. Similarly, as postulated with this research, grouping participants by their roles in relation to the perceived institutional hierarchy may also prove insightful.

Although the timing of this study should not be classified as a limitation, there were two significant events that likely influenced participant perceptions of online offerings and are



therefore worth mentioning. The data collection phase of this research occurred over a period of months that coincided with a series of university-wide communications regarding changes to BSU's budget model. While the budgetary changes did not take effect until after completing data collection, all participants were aware of the communications at the time of their interviews. One notable change outlined in the communications that may have influenced participant responses was in how BSU planned to allocate resources to its online delivery unit and to academic units with online offerings. These communications may have influenced participants to speak more readily about revenue generation and revenue sharing when discussing their perceptions of online offerings during their interviews.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic surely influenced perceptions of online offerings. Although data collection occurred during the summer and fall months of 2022, which is after BSU returned to in-person instruction, all participants were employed at BSU prior to the pandemic and witnessed how BSU utilized its experience and expertise with online course delivery to transition residential instruction to remote formats. While remote education is distinct from online education, the influence that these events had on participants' perceptions of online offerings and the role that online offerings play for BSU, should not be understated. As much of higher education has undoubtedly changed due to the pandemic, future research should examine if and how the role of online offerings has also transformed. Detailing how perceptions of online offerings have shifted in light of the pandemic will likely provide context to any changes universities make regarding institutional strategies and the use of online offerings.

### **Implications for Research**

This study's findings produce several implications for higher education researchers.

The first challenges the notion of bounded rationality in how participants perceived of the purpose of online offerings. Following March (1994) and Simon (1955), participants' perceptions of online offerings should have been bounded by their context, and therefore formed by limited and incomplete information. However, participants appeared to be aware of their bounds and, as such, were able to critique their own perceptions of online offerings using seemingly unbounded or external perspectives. This is most notably present in the tension that exists between participants' perceptions regarding the use of online offerings, their ability to rationalize why online offerings are utilized in such a way, participants' overall criticism of the current state, and their desire to see it improved. As such, this research suggests that decision makers may not necessarily be limited by bounded rationality if they are aware of the bounds and their decision making is influenced by their awareness.

This research also discusses how a hierarchy of university functions exists and that participants perceive functions positioned within the university's core as more important, valuable, or more aligned to the university's mission. However, as detailed in this study, mission alignment may be less useful in determining a function's institutional importance. Arguably, BSU's online offerings expand access to more students and remove more barriers to education than its residential offerings. However, these findings suggest that regardless of online offerings' mission alignment, if its purpose is to generate revenue, which is a necessity of non-profit universities but also a function that cannot exist within its core, then it will likely be positioned on the periphery and perceived as lower on the institutional hierarchy. Future research should leverage this study's findings to develop a model that details the hierarchy of university functions and if a correlation exists between hierarchy and proximity to the university's core.

This dissertation also suggests that certain characteristics are indicative of core and periphery functions. For example, a revenue generation purpose and a subsidization role seem to be characteristics of a periphery function, whereas being free to innovate, receiving funding from other university endeavors, and the ability to invest in quality enhancements are more indicative of university core functions. Using this study's findings regarding the distinctions between a university's core and periphery functions, future inquiry could lead to an approach or model that identifies and positions functions of higher education institutions according to their proximity to the university's core and periphery.

The need to better understand how universities determine core and periphery functions stems from another implication of this research, which is the general ambiguity that separates core and periphery functions. For example, the teaching and learning that occurs is arguably one of the most important and protected functions of a university. Participants in this study detailed how online and residential students take the same classes and earn the same degrees, and that online offerings provide equal or even more rigorous education compared to BSU's residential courses. As such, one could logically assume that teaching and learning, regardless of modality, reside in the university's core. However, as BSU's online offerings' primary purpose is to generate revenue and subsidize other university endeavors, online offerings, along with the teaching and learning that occurs in online courses, are deemed as periphery functions. Accordingly, research should examine the role and value that institutions place on *seemingly* core functions, such as teaching and learning, to illuminate their influence on determining a function's core/periphery position and to determine their influence on a function's position within the institutional hierarchy.

Equally interesting is the influence that revenue generation potential has on a function's core/periphery position and its influence on a function's position within the institutional hierarchy. As this study examined a *seemingly* core function of a university (e.g., online teaching and learning) and discovered that participants perceived it more as a periphery function due in large part because of its ability to generate revenue, future research should further explore if other core functions have moved to the periphery as institutions have attempted to capitalize on their ability to generate revenue. These research opportunities would provide context to the increasing commercialization of higher education and how institutions are transforming as a result.

As future research explores the ambiguity that distinguishes core and periphery functions, it should strive to account for the populations who are served by each function and if and how the served population influences whether a function is more core or periphery. In general, online offerings tend to attract older student populations as compared to residential programs. Online offerings are intentionally designed to cater to students with jobs, families, or other competing priorities, and as a result, more online students enroll part-time compared to their residential counterparts. In a residential setting, most online students would be characterized as either non-traditional or adult learners. If residential learning is a core function and online learning is periphery, then the institution's relationship with each population should be noted. The implications, however, are not simply that institutions value certain student demographics more than others; research should examine why the phenomenon is occurring. Specifically, why do traditional-aged residential students fall within an institution's core while adult online students do not?

Another implication and a hypothesis to the previous question is the influence that various populations of students have on an institution's reputation and its organizational legitimacy. Higher education institutions have historically focused on educating traditional-aged students in residential formats. Other university activities like athletics, research, living on a dorm, and Greek life coincide with maintaining a university's traditional-aged residential student population. While many of these activities are not available to adult learners who are taking online classes, the notion of having online adult learners participate in these activities could jeopardize an institution's reputation because doing so would challenge institutional norms and decades of tradition. As traditional-aged residential students help to affirm an institution's legitimacy and reputation, research should explore the influence of non-traditional student populations who enroll in online offerings. As a periphery function, online offerings subsidize the university's core functions and produce net revenue for the institution. As such, research should control for the revenue generation afforded by non-traditional online learners to detail the influence that the online student population has on an institution's reputation. This research could provide context to how institutions distinguish functions as core or periphery based on the student populations that they cater to or serve.

### **Implications for Practice**

Regarding implications for practice, this research suggests that in addition to a mission/market spectrum, activities of higher education institutions also reside on two other spectrums: one that spans from the institution's core to that of the periphery and one that details the relative hierarchy, importance, or value assigned to institutional functions. Accordingly, this research suggests that higher education practitioners should remain cognizant of where their

institution's activities fall on these spectrums and any possible correlations between a function's positioning across the three spectrums to maintain a healthy balance between the three.

Appropriately, certain roles within universities are geared toward a market focus and much of the mission efforts of a university are financially dependent on the success of these market-focused functions. However, as detailed in this study, market-focused endeavors tend to be on the lower end of the institutional hierarchy and can be classified with a lesser-than status. While this research does not suggest that online education professionals perceive online offerings as low quality, sentiments were expressed that the lesser-than status permeates throughout the institution. Expending too great a focus on the market could risk damaging the institution's identity in terms of its connection to its mission. As such, practitioners should strive to maintain a healthy balance between a market and a mission focus.

Furthermore, higher education practitioners should be cautious of what activities are used to generate revenue. While making money is a necessity of non-profit higher education institutions, revenue generation should remain a function of the periphery to avoid compromising the core mission of the institution. As a non-profit entity, focusing the attention of core functions on the market would shift the purpose of the institution to one that could be labeled as unbecoming. Additionally, if an institution attempts to focus its core functions on the market, the institution risks being transformed by the ebbs and flows of the market instead of maintaining a commitment to pursuing its institutional mission. Using online offerings to generate revenue for the institution places BSU in somewhat of a precarious position. Essentially, the university is leveraging a core function (e.g., teaching and learning) to generate revenue. However, as this research details, BSU has successfully positioned its online offerings as a periphery function, thus protecting the institution's identity from the ebbs and flows of the marketplace. Still, there

are consequences in moving core functions to the periphery. For example, participants detailed how views exist that label BSU's online offerings as less-than compared to the teaching and learning that occurs in residence. As practitioners grapple with decisions whether to divert core functions toward the market, they should be aware that doing so could damage perceptions of that function.

Additionally, while core functions often do need to be subsidized, an institution should work to fund core functions by using periphery functions. This will allow for the core functions that are integral to the mission and purpose of the institution to remain focused on achieving the institution's mission. Decisions to eliminate or alter core functions to be more market-focused because they are not financially self-sustaining should be thoroughly examined to understand the potential impact on the institution.

Higher education practitioners should also be wary of utilizing revenue from online offerings to subsidize standing budgetary line items. Too much pressure on an online offering to generate revenue will eventually lead to decisions where the quality of the online offering is being sacrificed in order to allocate funds toward other areas of the budget. In the short term, online programs might be able to show increases in net revenues, however, sacrificing investments in quality or in a program's ability to effectively recruit students will eventually hurt a program's standing and lower its ability to generate revenue. Not only will this hurt the quality and likely the enrollment numbers of the online offering, but it will also decrease net revenues, which means the other university initiatives will receive less funding. Practitioners should be cautious of focusing on increasing net revenues at the cost of reinvesting in online offerings as it will likely result in the opposite.

To safeguard against sacrificing investments in quality, several participants spoke favorably about reserving a percentage of the revenue an online offering makes to be reinvested in the online offering to ensure a high level of quality is maintained. However, a university's ever-increasing demands for revenue presents challenges for decision makers, and the notion that online offerings are good enough helps defend decisions to not reinvest in online offerings. Still, if safeguards are not established and revenue from online offerings are used to fund other endeavors, decision makers will be faced with difficult decisions if and when online offerings fail to generate enough revenue to fund these other activities while also investing in quality enhancements of online offerings.

As the landscape of higher education changes and institutions utilize more online, remote, and hybrid options not just to expand access to student populations, but also to add flexibility to the residential experience, the role of online offerings will need to change. Using online offerings to augment the residential experience should transform perceptions of online offerings and challenge their status as a peripheral function. Accordingly, previous decisions to limit investments toward innovation and quality enhancements will need to be revisited. The safeguarding and investment given to residential instruction may soon need to be extended to online offerings as well.

## **Summary**

This study sought to understand how higher education personnel perceive online offerings at their institution. Specifically, I wanted to examine perceptions of online offerings to understand the role that online offerings play within a university from an organizational context. I conducted interviews with 12 participants at an R1 institution in the Northeastern region of the United States. Participants were identified due to their decision-making roles regarding online



offerings and were grouped into three personnel roles: administration, tenure-track faculty who teach online, and third-space professionals (Whitchurch, 2012).

I utilized an approach to understanding perceptions of an institution's online offerings by envisioning a spectrum spanning from the institution's mission focus to that of the market focus. A spectrum supports, albeit simplifies Clark Kerr's (1988) analogy of the Greek acropolis and the agora and Gordon Winston's (1999) analogy of the church and the car dealership. Universities often find themselves somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, striving to balance the need to respond to markets while remaining committed to mission. A university's ability to function within the market while simultaneously pursuing its educational mission speaks to the complexities of higher education institutions. Within this context, this study sought to understand the role of one university's online offerings.

Based on the interviews from the study, participants perceive their institution's online offerings as serving more of a market purpose than a mission purpose. Although participants conveyed that online offerings pursue both the market and the mission simultaneously, decisions are made to suggest that the market purpose is the primary function. Through reviewing and analyzing data, I developed four overarching themes: 1) Access is a two-way street; 2) Core versus periphery; 3) Online as a revenue stream; and 4) Net revenue versus quality.

As online offerings appear to be engrained into many colleges and universities' future plans as a critical component for institutional survival, understanding how online offerings are used and for what purposes provides insight to the future of online higher education. While this case study catalogues perceptions to illuminate the role of online offerings at one university, future research has an opportunity to build connections across the field to better understand the evolving landscape that is online higher education.

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## APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

### Guiding research questions:

1. How do online higher education decision makers perceive the purpose of online offerings?
2. What major factors influence online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings?
3. How do online higher education decision makers' perceptions of online offerings vary across personnel types?

### Interview Questions:

#### Section A: General Information – position and purpose

- a. Please tell me about your current position.
  - a. What is it that you do?
  - b. How long have you been doing this?
- b. Please tell me how you ended up working with online courses?
- c. How does your role impact online offerings at BSU?
  - a. What kind of decisions do you make that impact online offerings?
  - b. What factors are typically considered when making decisions that impact online offerings?
    - i. Can you provide an example?
- d. As you make decisions that impact online offerings, what is your overarching goal?
  - a. What does “success” look like to you?
  - b. What are you attempting to achieve through your decision making?
  - c. What happens if you fail to achieve this goal?

#### Section B: Perspectives of online offerings

- a. Based on your experiences, please discuss what you see as the benefits of online offerings.
- b. Based on your experiences, please discuss what you see as the weaknesses/shortcomings of online offerings.
- c. Based on the two previous questions (benefits and shortcoming), do you feel the benefits outweigh the shortcomings or vice versa?
  - a. Why?
- d. In your opinion, what changes could be made to online offerings to either increase the benefits or decrease the shortcomings?
  - a. Why do you think these changes have not occurred?
- e. Do you think there is a difference between an online course and the same requirement taken residentially?
  - a. Please explain.
  - b. Do you think that one is easier than the other?
  - c. Does one lack aspects that the other has?
- f. How do you feel when you hear that someone is attending BSU online?

- a. Does a certain type of person come to mind?
- g. How do you feel about online students earning the same degree as residential students?
- h. What would you say to a prospective student who was trying to decide between attending BSU online or in residence?
  - a. Why?

Section C: Purpose of online offerings

- a. What do you see as the core functions of the university?
  - a. What are a few examples?
- b. Why do you think online education exist?
- c. What would you say is the purpose of online education?
  - a. Why does BSU have online offerings?
- d. Do you believe online offerings should exist at BSU if their expenses exceed their revenue?
  - a. Why?
- e. Referring the previous question, do you believe residential offerings should exist if their expenses exceed their revenue?
  - a. Why?
  - b. If a difference is communicated:
    - i. Why do you think there is a difference between online and residential?
- f. How important is online education to BSU's future success?
  - a. Why?

Section D: Response to statements:

- The most important function of BSU's online offerings is to increase educational access.
- The most important function of BSU's online offerings is to generate revenue.
- BSU's online offerings are a core function of the university.
- Revenue from online offerings should be used to cross-subsidize other university endeavors.
- Revenue from other university endeavors should be used to cross-subsidize online offerings.

Section E:

- Is there anything else that we've left out that you feel is pertinent to understanding your perceptions of online offerings?

## Curriculum Vita for Steven Chichester

### EDUCATION

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Doctor of Philosophy, Higher Education	2023
<i>The Pennsylvania State University, College of Education, University Park, PA</i>	
Master of Arts, History	2011
<i>Liberty University, College of Arts and Sciences, Lynchburg, VA</i>	
Bachelor of Science, History,	2009
<i>Liberty University, College of Arts and Sciences, Lynchburg, VA</i>	

### SELECTED PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Director of Organizational Strategy	2022-Present
<i>The Pennsylvania State University, Outreach and Online Education, University Park, PA</i>	
Analysis and Planning Consultant	2019-2022
<i>The Pennsylvania State University, Outreach and Online Education, University Park, PA</i>	
Associate Director of Graduate Enrollment Services	2017-2019
<i>The Pennsylvania State University, The Graduate School, University Park, PA</i>	
Assistant Director of Graduate Enrollment Services	2015-2017
<i>The Pennsylvania State University, The Graduate School, University Park, PA</i>	

### SELECTED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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Graduate Research Assistant, Department of History	2009-2011
<i>Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA</i>	

### SELECTED TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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Instructor, College of Arts and Sciences, <i>Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA</i>	2011-Present
HIEU 201: History of Europe I; HIEU 202: History of Europe II; HIUS 221: US History Prior to 1865; HIUS 222: US History Since 1865; HIUS 313: Jeffersonian America	
Instructor, <i>Virginia Western Community College, Roanoke, VA</i>	2012-2015
SDV 100: College Success Skills	

### SELECTED PRESENTATIONS

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“Advancing DEIB means what exactly? A pragmatic approach to DEIB assessment”	2023
<i>2023 Assessment Institute, Indianapolis, IN</i>	
“Moving from action focused to impact focused in advancing DEIB”	2022
<i>Engagement Scholarship Consortium Annual Conference, University of Georgia</i>	
“Need A Jumpstart? Developing measures for assessing DEIB”	2022
<i>Penn State Data Summit 2022, University Park, PA</i>	
“Mapping Your Route: Utilizing strategic planning to achieve your engagement mission”	2021
<i>Engagement Scholarship Consortium Annual Conference, Penn State University</i>	
“Woodrow Wilson’s Decision for War in 1917.”	2011
<i>Phi Alpha Theta Historical Honors Society Regional Conference, Newport, VA</i>	