

### Abstract

Guided by the theories on work-life balance and life satisfaction, the purpose of this research was to understand the effects of autonomy and choice on overall life satisfaction (OLS) of graduate students attending an online university versus attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university. With the academic demands of physically attending courses at a preset time, the obligations of higher education can create an imbalance in a student's social and familial life. This quantitative study investigated the extent to which graduate students attending a completely online university report a higher overall satisfaction with life compared to similar students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university. Sixty-five online students and 82 traditional students responded to a demographic survey, along with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS), which were administered via an online survey website. The results were analyzed through the Mann-Whitney U-test in an ex post facto between groups comparison. Students attending a traditional university reported statistically significantly higher SWLS scores than did online students ( $p = .027$ ). These results support the hypothesis of a significant difference among school types. In an effort to promote positive social change, this study suggests that universities provide more emphasis on fostering a sense of community and group affiliation among their students. Students, educators, and institutions all have a stake in these technological advances. The needs of each must be addressed in order to provide a beneficial learning experience and promote the successful evolution of a multi-billion dollar industry.

Differences in Life Satisfaction Among Graduate Students from Online and Traditional  
Universities

by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

With work consuming up to 25% of an adult's waking life and job satisfaction making up to 25% of overall life satisfaction (Grawitch, Gottschalk, & Munz, 2006), employers and researchers alike are seeing the importance of providing a better work-life balance. This work-life balance is also important to students, as for many, college is their main job, with many also working in regular jobs along with attending courses. For these students, the level of stress induced from academic demands conflicting with familial or other outside obligations disrupts the balance and creates a destructively stressful environment (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990).

In a traditional educational setting, students are required to attend classes and conduct work around specified hours. This demand for physical presence in the classroom can cut into family/personal time or time spent working. Online universities have endeavored to eliminate the need to attend class at any specific time, thereby freeing up students to arrange their days around what they need to accomplish personally (Zhao & Rashid, 2010). In doing so, online curriculum should lead to a better quality of life for students (Beutell, 2010) because the stress from obligatory attendance is removed. The ability to mold academic requirements around social and familial obligations reduces work-family conflict, thereby increasing overall life satisfaction (Dorin, 2007; Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006).

Online degrees can be attained at a faster pace than traditionally attained degrees due to their inherent, asynchronous structure. This does take a student's self-discipline into account (Wilkinson, 2010). As the field of online education advances, students are

seeing opportunities to take courses directly relevant to their majors, without the need to take superfluous elective courses that may be required in a brick-and-mortar setting (Harasim, 2000; Sturgis, 2012). With this shift in education delivery, people are able to enjoy a more balanced life by self-managing their time according to what must be done and what can wait. This ability allows for increased autonomy over one's life, which in return provides for a better work-life balance (Shabi, 2000).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Focusing on the theories of work-life balance (Shabi, 2000) and its influence on life satisfaction, I examined patterns of perceived overall life satisfaction among graduate students attending an online university versus that of graduate students attending a traditional, brick-and-mortar university. The purpose of this research was to understand the effects autonomy and choice have on overall life satisfaction of graduate students attending two distinctly differently formatted universities. Due to the nature of increased autonomy in the school requirements and the increased personal freedom, students of online universities should exhibit higher levels of life satisfaction because they have increased flexibility with which to construct relationships and personal lives without the encumbrances of forced class time (Shabi, 2000). In theory, when students have an active role in deciding how they will interact with their academic institution, work and life satisfaction will improve, and stress will be reduced as compared with those students who do not have any or, at best, minimal choice over their scheduling (Grawitch, Trares, & Kohler, 2007). Considering these concepts as an underpinning of overall life satisfaction, graduate students attending online universities in this study were expected to report



significantly higher levels of overall life satisfaction than graduate students attending traditional universities. People have a desire to control their lives in every aspect; when allowed increased control and choice, subjective well-being increases. Given the choice of schools, students who select the school that offers the most student autonomy should report higher levels of overall life satisfaction. Increased choice and free will should directly influence perceived life satisfaction. As autonomy increases, so should subjective well-being.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The issue examined in this study was to address a paradigm shift in higher education from traditional brick and mortar learning with a physical presence requirement to a more technological experience that encompasses online courses and little if no required physical presence and to delineate its daily impact on the lives of its students. In the past, attending a university for graduate education was a matter of course. Now there are choices, and students can decide where and how they attend classes. This choice may have an impact in social and academic satisfaction. Adjusting student requirements by increasing scheduling and attendance autonomy may prove an effective means of stabilizing the reportedly stressful discord that can arise among academic, familial and social obligations (Macon et al., 1990). By separating students according to school type, this research will allow an insight into how different modes of education influence students in their day-to-day lives.

## Research Question and Hypotheses

An increase in overall life satisfaction (OLS) has been observed in teleworkers (Golden et al., 2006), but little research has been conducted on how distance learning and online education affects the overall life satisfaction of students. For this quantitative study, the specific research question and its hypotheses were as follows:

Do graduate students attending a completely online university report a statistically significantly higher overall satisfaction with life compared to similar students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university as measured with the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985)?

$H_0$ 1: There will be no significant difference in the level of overall life satisfaction perceived among graduate students attending an online university when compared to graduate students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university.

$H_1$ 1: Perceived levels of overall life satisfaction will be significantly higher for graduate students attending an online university than similar students attending traditional brick-and-mortar universities.

Research in the field of work-life balance and life satisfaction supports the notion that increased autonomy in workers yields a better-rounded and contented employee (Golden et al., 2007). Because students report similar stresses from attending school as work, for example, fitting in social demands and balancing family obligations with the demand of academic time (Mosca & Paul, 2010), the hypothesis examined in this study should yield similar results as those studies that focused on telecommuting. School type, either traditional or online served as the independent variable, with overall life

satisfaction being the dependent variable. A more in-depth review of the methods used is discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Significance and Social Change Implications**

This research aims to bring about a better understanding of the impact of autonomy on overall life satisfaction in an academic setting. Much research has been conducted regarding telework (Grawitch et al., 2007) and on life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). Distance learning and its effects on overall life satisfaction is a new and relatively under researched area. Previous research focused heavily on organizational and employee-related issues regarding work-life balance. Prior studies pertaining to life satisfaction are largely specific to problem areas such as aging, disabilities, or traumas and how they impact a person's perceived life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985). Very few resources offer information regarding telework and overall life satisfaction; even fewer provide information regarding overall life satisfaction as a result of the autonomous nature of distance learning. Studying this topic will provide needed insight into how institutions can adapt to provide a better student experience.

Viewing students as dynamic beings requiring a balance among life and work to live a more enhanced and fulfilling life, organizations should expect a more loyal, healthier, happier, and more productive population by simple application of transformative institutional practices (Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006). The impetus of this study's design was to show the paramount importance of work-life balance as it applies to overall satisfaction with life. Because higher education can be a major stressor, findings could be helpful in designing future, more in depth investigation across a myriad

of settings beyond the academic front. With over \$300 billion spent each year on employee related issues such as absenteeism, increased healthcare costs, and production loss due to illness (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010), research into improving work-life balance will create a shift in how work is conducted and required.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Distance learning:* This emerging trend (Dorin, 2007) allows students of all levels of education and continuing education to attend fully accredited college courses without having to attend physical classes (Sellani, 2002).

*Overall life satisfaction:* The terms *overall* and *general* are used because of the design intent by the authors of the survey. Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) stated that few surveys examined total life satisfaction. Most were subjective in nature, focusing on certain aspects of life such as coping with injury or aging and were therefore not applicable to larger demographics globally. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) was designed to examine the notion and appreciation of overall life satisfaction free from participant bias or subjective interpretation.

*Telework:* The ability to work from any place other than the traditional work setting. Often employees work via home computers and mobile phones to conduct business in much the same way they can in the office (Grawitch, 2007).

*Work-life balance:* Refers to an employee's ability to meet the challenge of handling conflicting social and familial obligations without allowing them to disrupt performance at work (Lockwood, 2003).

### **Assumptions**

Certain inbuilt occurrences associated with the participants and data collection were not adjusted for and were assumed throughout the study, including:

1. Respondents answered truthfully and without biases at each level of the survey.
2. The Diener et al. (1985) SWLS served as a highly reliable and valid instrument with which to gauge perceptions of overall life satisfaction.
3. The survey platform used were easy to access and operate efficiently so as not to dissuade objective participation.
4. Participants represented a cohort of similar social and educational values.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Due to the nature of the current design, certain limitations and delimitations are inherent:

1. Because this study only looks at differences among graduate students from the two universities, extraneous variables such as current work demand or number of children may have contributed unevenly to perceptions of overall life satisfaction.
2. Due to the small number of participating universities, this survey may not have fully represented graduate students as a whole. Nevertheless this study will serve as a foundation for future research in the field because of this detraction.
3. Due to the anonymous online survey dissemination technique, failure to interview the participants in person may have lead to errant or inappropriate responses.

4. A benefit of this survey is its overall length. With survey time at less than 5 minutes, participants should have been more likely not only to sign up but to complete the survey in full.
5. To be concise and to acquire as many participants as possible, the SWLS was used as the testing instrument. A more thorough examination may include a qualitative interview or open response portion.
6. This survey only looked at graduate students from the two universities. Other demographic characteristics such as race, gender, number of children, and so forth were collected for possible future use, but those data were not used included in this study's findings.
7. Due to the scope of this topic, only one university from each domain, each representing either an online or a traditional brick-and-mortar institution, was chosen.

### **Organization of the Study**

Chapter 1 has introduced the concept of work-life balance and its influence on overall satisfaction with life. The issue of life satisfaction as a function of school type was addressed. The research questions, hypotheses, and significance of the study were discussed. Key limitations, delimitations, assumptions, and important terms were also addressed.

Chapter 2 provides an in-depth look at the most pertinent literature relevant to this study. A historical account of the evolution of overall life satisfaction precedes its involvement with work-life balance. Rationale for the SWLS is offered, especially its

utility as a reliable measure of overall life satisfaction. Articles on telework and distance learning are closely examined and applied directly to this study. Chapter 2 ends with an examination of future trends and implications of the advancement of distance learning through online course offerings.

The methodology, procedures used to administer the SWLS, and the demographic survey are discussed in detail in Chapter 3. The results of the survey analyses and any findings yielded will be presented in Chapter 4. The final chapter will provide a summary of the findings and any conclusions that emerge from the results. Chapter 5 will also contain a discussion and recommendations for future research.

The idea that people need to strike a harmonious balance among work or school and the demands of life is a growing phenomenon (Thompson & Aspinwall, 2009). Being satisfied with one's life is not just a static result of where someone happens to be in life but a robust and dynamic concept that can change and be manipulated through direct and indirect actions (Golden et al., 2006). This research intends to provide insight into how a small field of change can affect the larger self-concept. Autonomy or free choice in academic scheduling represented by university type, either online or brick-and-mortar, is the independent variable in this design. Fluctuation of these [noun here for precision—"of these" what?] should result in observable differences in overall life satisfaction.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The concept of life satisfaction has typically been consumed with interests in how tangible processes such as aging, life stages, and mental or physical ailments affect subjective well-being (Pavot & Diener, 2008). Little work has been done linking the emerging phenomenon of online education and how overall life satisfaction is affected due to the autonomous and often amorphous nature of learning environments (Dorin, 2007). This study looks at how graduate students are affected by online curricula and compares responses of online students to those in traditional or “ground” schools. For an idea of how overall life satisfaction will be measured, an introduction into the theory behind subjective well-being and its evolution into life satisfaction will provide a foundation for the research.

### **Historical Perspective**

The extent that choice affects mood has been a much studied field in psychology (Wilson, 1967). Identifying the motivations behind certain choices and the ramifications of these decisions is highly valuable especially for those in a position to profit from these choices. In order to understand these affects, psychologists focused on individual satisfaction. This examination evolved over time. This review looks at the beginning of this research and its evolution from the study of subjective well being to the emergence of overall life satisfaction.

### **Subjective Well Being**

Defined as “a broad category of phenomena that include people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgments of life satisfaction,” subjective



well-being (SWB) has been officially investigated for over 40 years (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999, p. 277). Wilson (1967) presented a broad review of subjective well-being research entitled. Based on the limited data available at that time, Wilson concluded that the happy person is a "young, healthy, well-educated, well-paid, extroverted, optimistic, worry-free, religious, married person with high self-esteem, job morale, modest aspirations, of either sex and of a wide range of intelligence" (p. 294).

Psychology at that time focused mainly on how negative states of being affected disruptive behaviors and thought patterns. In essence, the more comfortable, educated and stress-free and people were, the more well adjusted they should be psychologically (Diener et al., 1999). To examine the effects of mood and incentive on ordinary day-to-day living, SWB researchers learned that people are motivated by positive incentives, not just misery avoidance (Myers & Diener, 1995). However, people are often motivated by entirely different things (Pavot & Diener, 2008): What is enticing to one can be outright rejected by another. Therefore, a new field of research began investigating the interrelation of subjective well being and overall satisfaction with life (Diener et al., publication year required).

Wilson (1967) targeted specific domains as indicative of higher levels of SWB. He concluded that married, extraverted, optimistic, religious persons demonstrate a higher level of SWB than their counterparts but also that gender, socioeconomic status, and age could also play a role, although these variables were often of less importance because psychological processes associated with them were often shaped by temporary constructs such as coping abilities and goal setting in relation to current events (Diener et

al., 1999). The aim of SWB researchers was in predicting long-term patterns in people across a myriad of influences As Diener et al. (1999) pointed out, understanding these predictors is difficult because of confounding environmental factors such as temporary disability, maturation, coping skills, and social stressors.

### **The Emergence of Overall Satisfaction with Life**

The field of subjective well-being research continued to evolve. A large part of this evolution separated the field into three distinct parts, positive affect, negative affect, and life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey, as cited in Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The first two fields are concerned with the emotional aspects of SWB, while the last one examines the cognitive-judgmental processes involved (Diener et al., 1985). Defined as “a global assessment of a person’s quality of life according to his chosen criteria” (Shin & Johnson, 1978, p. 478), individual reports of quality of life were just that—individual. Each person has an internal standard that is personally compared to an accepted social norm. This norm is up to each individual to accept and implement as a metric with which to determine personal life satisfaction. This notion is critical to understanding SWB. People must be allowed to decide their levels of life satisfaction based on ideals and events meaningful to them and not necessarily important to the researcher or the research being conducted (Diener, 1984). As this understanding took hold, scales were developed to investigate particular cohorts of people sharing some common social element, like disability or aging. The problem was that these scales were not universally applicable and were technically only useful for their intended audiences. Due to a lack of instruments that could investigate participants’ overall judgments of their

lives, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was developed in 1984 as a way to determine a participant's overall satisfaction with life (Diener et al., 1985).

### **The Satisfaction with Life Scale**

In designing the SWLS, the initial instrument contained 48 self-report items pertaining to the satisfaction with one's life (Diener et al., 1985). Factor analysis revealed positive affect, negative affect, and satisfaction as the factors. The researchers removed the affect items and narrowed the survey to 10 questions, which were again reduced to five items due to redundancy in wording. The questions were presented to participants who rated their answers on a seven point scale ranging from 1=*strongly disagree* to 7=*strongly agree*. Testing of the SWLS was divided into three parts. The first part was purely investigating psychometric properties of the scale. Initially 176 undergraduate students were issued the survey. Two months later, 76 were readministered the scale. The mean score was 23.5, and the standard deviation was 6.43. The test-retest correlation coefficient was .82 with the coefficient alpha being .87, providing support for the SWLS being a valid psychometric instrument (Diener et al., 1985).

The second study examined how the SWLS compared with other several other instruments that measured comparable areas. Each instrument compared showed a strong positive correlation to the other validated scales except the Marlowe-Crowne measure, which examines social desirability responses, and the Affect Intensity Measure (AIM), which explores emotional intensity (Diener et al., 1985). The results indicated that the SWLS was not only reliable but also valid for measuring life satisfaction.

The last study expanded the population set by examining the responses of elderly participants averaging 75 years old. These participants fell into four categories: nursing home residents, former businessmen in a coffee group, religious group members, and shut-ins. Two trained interviewers administered an hour-long qualitative interview including the Adams (1969) Life Satisfaction Scale (LSI). Afterward participants completed the SWLS, and the interviewers also completed the SWLS, rating each participant. Mean scores for the SWLS were 25.8, and rating for the interviews had a .73 correlation with each other on the participant ratings. Results showed a .43 correlation with the self-ratings on the SWLS. The SWLS and the LSI also showed a correlation of .68. Moreover, total correlations for each of the five SWLS questions were .81, .63, .61, .75, and .66 yielding more support of the SWLS as a valid scale with good internal consistency (Diener et al., 1985, p. 74).

Validity, consistency, and reliability have been repeatedly tested throughout various environments. The SWLS has demonstrated an effective and reliable tool, not only in America but also in South American, Portuguese, Korean, and Chinese cultures, underscoring its use as a good instrument to measure overall life satisfaction across cultures (Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011; Laranjeira, 2009; Vera-Villaruel, Urzua, Pavez, Celis-Atenas, & Silva, 2012). These findings also support the promotion of using the SWLS as a reliable instrument in the current study.

## Work-Life Balance

### **Work-Life Balance**

Having established a need for an instrument that analyzes overall life satisfaction, researchers expanded on possible reasons behind lower satisfaction levels across various cohorts. Of particular interest to applied psychologist was how levels of life satisfaction impacted job performance (Zelenski, Murphy, & Jenkins, 2008). Investigating 75 professionals working in the Canadian private sector and combining them with secondary data of 143 respondents working for the federal government, Zelenski et al. (2008) used several instruments to gauge stress and satisfaction with life, including the SWLS in an effort to determine the presence of a positive correlation among happiness and increased job productivity. Findings supported the theory that happier workers worked harder and presented with higher levels of overall life satisfaction. However, there seemed to be a bit more to the findings than just a simple positive correlation. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “U.S. companies spend about \$226 billion a year in absenteeism, productivity loss, turnover, and health care costs” (Rosch, as cited in APA, 2010, p. 1). Most of this was reportedly due to stress and low levels of job satisfaction and life satisfaction. Grawitch et al. (2007) investigated employee outcomes in relation to how the workplace functioned in an effort to illuminate a link between employee productivity, retention, and satisfaction. Several factors were determined to assist in creating a more productive and engaged employee. In creating a foundational structure upon which to build a healthy organization, the concept of work-life balance (WLB) is critical to improving employee job and life satisfaction. Other areas defining the model

were employee involvement, employee growth and development, recognition, and health and safety (Grawitch et al., 2006).

Higgins, Duxbury, and Irving (1992, as referenced in Grawitch et al., 2006) found that conflicts between family and work obligations diminished perceptions of both work and life satisfaction. This conflict resulted in increased absenteeism, lower productivity and ultimately higher job turnover. They suggested that in an effort to curtail the deleterious effects of work-family conflict, organizations should consider “alternative work arrangements” that allowed for improved flexibility and more employee control in not only employees’ work activities but also in family/ social venues. Grawitch and Barber (2010) furthered this notion by adding that employers that offer support to employees with flexible work arrangements significantly improved their life satisfaction and reduced their psychological strain.

The work of Grawitch et al. (2007) examined the results of 152 participants from a mixture of faculty and staff of a Midwestern university. Using the Grawitch et al.’s (2006) model for predicting employee outcomes, Grawitch et al. (2007) found significant predictive validity across each of the five areas. Most notably, the areas of recognition and of work-life balance showed notable suppression effects suggesting an even stronger link between employee satisfaction and WLB than first predicted. Again these findings supported the notion that employee productivity and retention is largely influenced by the ability to strike a healthy balance between the demands of work and the demands of life in general. Focusing on work-life balance is an important factor in understanding the effects of distance learning and its effects on life satisfaction among students. By

balancing personal life with academic or professional obligations, this balance can be strained and understanding this relationship is integral in gaining insight into overall life satisfaction (Grawitch & Barber, 2010).

### **Telecommuting and Work-Family Conflict**

Viewed as a precursor to online learning models, telecommuting is a relevant topic to provide a foundation for the current study. Telecommuting and distance learning share a similar design in that both affect change due to increased autonomy of time and enhanced work-life balance (Ng, 2006). Both also result in increased productivity and retention due to increased intrinsic motivation and reduced work-family conflict (Ng, 2006). There are detrimental similarities as well such as social isolation and emotional detachment from the workplace (Dorin, 2007). Economic incentives also have shown to be a positive return in both telecommuting and the development of online educational programs (Mintz, 2004). In order to understand the process from an organizational perspective, background in both telecommuting, and distance learning is offered.

To decrease the stress of healthily balancing life with work, organizations began implementing telecommuting into the work environment for jobs that could be done away from the office. Telecommuting allows employees to work from home or some other location, usually of their choosing, either part-time or full-time. This realized autonomy not only frees the employee from the typical obligatory Monday-Friday office time, but it also can result in a lower overhead for the company because resources used to provide for the employees' job functions can be much curtailed, with many being provided by the employee themselves (Kofinas, 2010).

According to a survey conducted in June 2011, over 26.2 million people worked from home or some satellite location 1 or more times per week (Rhodes, 2011). That figure represents almost 20% of the adult working population. Despite overall numbers of teleworkers declining, the survey mentions that the number of persons working at least one day per week increased from 72 to 84% with over a third of the respondents stating that they felt the ability to work away from the office as a reward from the company (Rhodes, 2011). This reward for some can be seen as an irritant for others, especially those still traveling to the office for the daily grind.

In a study involving the impact of telecommuting on employees remaining in the office, Golden (2007) reported increased emotional separation coupled with increased irritation with telecommuters. This disdain was largely due to having to perform extra tasks like transfer calls, locate the employee, or simply perform necessary office tasks required to keep the office running smoothly, none of which were required of the teleworkers. The increase in extra job responsibilities led to lower satisfaction with coworkers and increased job dissatisfaction. Nonetheless, in the face of technological advancement, current economic climate, and the increasing competitive business environment (Glubczynski, Kossek, & Lambert, 2003), telecommuting has shown to be advantageous for organizations seeking to acquire new talent (Thompson & Aspinwall, 2009).

Simply offering the option is not always the only thing required in order to maximize employee satisfaction and increase productivity. It also seems important to pay attention to how much time is spent at home and away from work. As employees



increase hours telecommuting, a noted decrease in work-family conflict occurs. This, however, results in increased interference of personal life interfering with work known as family-work conflict (Golden et al., 2006).

Hill, Erikson, and Holmes (2010) investigated the perceptions of work-life conflict and employee job satisfaction from employees around the world. Workers for IBM participated from 75 countries participated in the 2007 IBM Global Work and Life Issues Survey resulting in data from 24,436 participants. Hill et al. filtered this data to fit their survey design. Based on the responses, they concluded that telecommuting is important to the employee and helps to offset work-family conflict, or work interfering with familial/social demands, but in order to maximize the benefit, certain allowances need to be made. Hill et al. also reported that some participants were actually able to work an additional one to two 8-hour days before any work-family conflict arose given the ability to schedule their own time. This reflected a higher productivity yield and advantages for both the employee and employer. Some cultural differences were uncovered. For instance Asian countries reported less of a demand or desire for telecommuting. This was thought to be due to the increased collectivistic nature of East Asian cultures with the cultural expectation to work with others and not at home. Notably, those respondents from the more collectivistic areas also reported more work-family conflict than the other areas surveyed.

## **Distance Learning**

Education has traditionally been taught in a physical location. Students have to physically show up and participate in functions typically dictated by a teacher. This is all done at very specific times and for a very specific duration. Distance learning harnesses the educational requirements without forcing students into a classroom at a particular time. This realized autonomy is appealing and has created a business model that has seen online universities explode in number and in enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Many factors are driving this change in education. Several are mentioned below.

### **Income Potential**

With the success of telecommuting, employers are not the only ones noticing the potential of off-site attendance. Colleges and universities have seen the temptation to provide telecourses and online services for students in a dramatic effort to increase enrollment and the influx of tuition, grants, and other related fees (Totty, Grimes, & Street, 2001). In 1996 Hyung Joo Park took \$200,000 in savings and started Abraham Lincoln University (ALU), a hybrid-format law school requiring some face time with the instructor but the majority of time spent on self-directed distance work. Tuition is far less at around \$6,000, compared to \$17,000 for in-state students earning the same degree from UCLA. ALU now boasts \$2 million in net profit each year (Mintz, 2004). While this profit is impressive for a small organization, larger organizations such as Concord Law School, which offers 100% online courses, make substantially more (Mintz, 2004). The upsurge in for-profit institutions has gained much attention. There appears to be a merging of public and private interests. With the private sector obtaining only 4-5% of all

college students but with over 33% and growing of the total online student population, universities are focusing their interests in programs that make the most money easily (Gallagher, 2003). To compete and stay relevant, traditional schools must embrace this paradigm shift in higher education. Failure to embrace this emergence could have far-reaching consequences (Howell et al., 2003).

### **Distance Learning, an Administrative Tug of War**

Increased revenue may be one reason to consider online and distance learning courses. Another issue universities are dealing with is the flagging economy and advancing technology (Totty et al., 2001). Distance learning may offer a life line of sorts since there appears to be a growing demand for this flexible alternative to attending classes in a brick-and-mortar institution. Allen and Seaman (2007) in connection with the Babson Survey Research Group and the College Board conducted a survey sent to 4,491 schools across the U.S. Of the surveys sent, 2,535 were received. Usable responses were analyzed and data from previous similar surveys were also extrapolated creating the final data set.

Allen and Seaman's (2007) report focused on the emergence and integration of distance learning, how it was received by faculty and administration, and its overall effects on student utility. Their findings suggest a dramatic shift away from traditional learning platforms such as professor driven lesson plans and to a more fluid, dynamic student driven environment where students choose a majority of what, how and when coursework is conducted. With 20% of all U.S. higher education students having taken at least one online course (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003, as referenced in

Dorin, 2007), “online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher educational enrolments with a compound annual growth rate of 21.5%” (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 1). With over two-thirds of higher education institutions offering some form of online coursework, overwhelming support for the shift toward distance learning as the new platform of higher education, with over 69% of academic leaders believing that student demand for online alternatives, would continue to increase (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Out of the drawbacks to distance learning, two main conflicts arose. The main rejection of merging with distance learning is faculty aversion. Many courses are the intellectual property of the professors, and if they leave the university, their syllabi, materials and lesson plans go with them. Creating courses that are owned by the university and implemented in a sort of cookie-cutter fashion is repugnant to some seasoned academics. Additionally professors need to be trained in effective distant teaching technology. That is they have to learn how to manipulate and navigate comfortably through this new computerized, and less hierarchical format.

Another issue is the substantial initial cost of start-up. Designing and implementing a distance learning module is cost prohibitive in many instances. Coupled with the cost of retraining and compensating sitting staff is a deterrent despite reported beliefs in over a third of the faculty that online curricula will be a beneficial addition to the university’s portfolio and should attract more students (Allen & Seaman, 2007). To combat this issue, many institutions have created separate arms or colleges distinctly different from their own (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003). For example, Penn State’s

World Campus was created to provide a distinction between traditional and distance offerings (Howell et al., 2003). Some schools have also turned to adjunct staff and faculty. The addition of adjunct faculty can bring in technological expertise and content knowledge without the overhead and salary demands of full-time staff. Many online adjunct professionals are comfortable with the online format and work in a sort of free-agent manner that allows predictability and can decrease conflict due to reduced role ambiguity (Sellani & Harrington, 2002; Zhao & Rashid, 2010).

While some have theorized that cost savings coupled with income generation was a major motivator in implementing distance learning within a university's course selection, Allen and Seaman (2007) discovered the primary reason for this migration was improved student access. This was found to be the case across all of the respondents. Of the most engaged online institutions, degree completion was also seen as extremely important. For them, the focus was on making sure the student would actually complete the degree and not trail off and never finish. With the institutions that are more accepting of distance learning formats, they also were seen as the most aggressive in creating new programs and predicted the highest level of growth in this field. For them, staying on the frontlines of distance learning push was a factor in attracting the best and most students to their schools. In short, for the most engaged universities, the crux of the distance learning phenomena is where quality meets quantity. This focus, in theory, should result in a satisfying student experience. Not in terms solely representing academic achievement, but in the experience as a whole (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

## **Future Trends**

Trying to predict future trends is not always precise, but can provide some insight into what tomorrow may bring when based on emerging themes. In 2003, an integrative literature review on distance learning and its impact on higher learning yielded common themes that demonstrated where the future of online studies may be headed. Howell et al. (2003) discussed 32 separate trends complicating the rising field. One such anomaly was that, at the current rates, traditional universities with the influx of new high school graduates, combined with the need for lifelong adult learning will simply run out of facility space to accommodate all of the applicants. Distance learning provides a sustainable solution to this growing problem. Another key trend was that students looked for courses that could meet their schedules. Based on statistics, many students, 77%, begin work at one university and may finish at another. Being able to take the credits for completed coursework and transfer them to another institution, known as “academic currency,” was seen as valuable by potential learners. Universities that did not allow transfer credits or that had isolated courses that could not transfer were seen as less desirable (Johnstone, Ewell, & Paulson, 2002). They may skip a semester due to work or other obligations. They may also need the course for work, but cannot conveniently take off to attend classes.

Alvin Toffler wrote, “The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who can’t read and write. They will be those who can’t learn, unlearn, and relearn” (as cited in Burger, Carels, & Els, 2009, p. 46). The interest for more online alternatives has even gained governmental attention. In 1998, 83% of governors identified “allowing students

to obtain education anytime and anyplace via technology” as a critical characteristic of universities in the 21st century (de Alva, as cited in Howell et al., 2003). Internet usage is predicted to grow at an exponential pace with students being able to access materials from a myriad of locations at a usage growth rate of over 70% in just 5 years (Murray, 2003). Retention and program completion statistics found that 66% of distance-learning institutions have over 80% completion rates, matching or exceeding those from traditional formats (Brigham, 2003; Roach, 2002). The recession and the influence of availability of funds through state federal grants also [please finish this sentence to make clear what these points have to do with your topic]. To combat the lingering recessive environment, universities are looking at ways to expand their options to students without incurring heavy rollout expenses, but as technology continues to progress, the line between local and distance learning is disappearing. There appears to be a paradigm shift in education and universities and companies alike are awakening to the opportunities inherent in this progression (Howell et al., 2003). Results show that the return on investment is promising with high retention rates and impressive course completion rates (Brigham, 2003; Roach, 2002). Students also show satisfaction with, and eagerness to take, online courses (Dorin, 2007). These findings provide the basis for formulating theories about the effects of online education and overall life satisfaction, which add context for this study.

### **Distance Learning and Life Satisfaction**

With the transitioning of so many students to online settings, it is relevant to ask whether this change provides a fulfilling and enjoyable experience. Dorin (2007) looked

at adults over 55 years old living independently who had taken online courses and compared them to those that had not taken courses. She found that just taking courses online at all significantly increased overall life satisfaction compared to those who do not take courses online. In fact, results showed that taking courses online could be a great tool to increase overall life satisfaction in aging adults, making them feel more competent and autonomous. A few research studies regarding life satisfaction in relation to online and distance learning were also found. To see any difference of perceived overall life, it may be necessary to test life satisfaction levels among students taking purely online courses to those attending traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. To bridge this gap, this study examined just that topic.

### **Summary**

Researching subjective well-being has been around for decades. It involves looking at personal emotions, life circumstances, and reactions to the environment (Diener et al., 1999). The essence of SWB seems to concern how it manifests in overall life satisfaction. Because people spend a majority of their waking hours at work (Grawitch et al., 2006), studying the impacts of the workplace on life satisfaction is a natural step. Changes in the work dynamic, especially with the growth in telecommuting, brings a new dimension to what had been a fixed system. Results have shown that when people could choose how their workday was spent, that choice had an effect on perceived life satisfaction. Because satisfaction and happiness are linked to productivity, understanding how this new system influences people is important (Zelenski et al., 2008). Seeing the success of and trends toward telecommuting, higher education institutions



have created hybrid to fully online programs that are satisfying a demand as well as showing a profit (Mintz, 2004). Results indicate that online programs should be an emerging market for some time to come and quite possibly signal a paradigm shift in how higher education functions (Howell et al, 2003). Because this phenomenon is relatively new, examining how online courses affect overall life satisfaction in students should be promoted (Dorin, 2007). As technology advances, understanding the short term reactions to this experience may prove critical to predicting any long-term results.

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### Chapter 3: Research Method

With work consuming up to 25% of an adult's waking life, and job satisfaction making up to 25% of overall life satisfaction (Grawitch et al., 2006), employers and researchers are seeing the importance of providing a better work-life balance. This work-life balance is also important to students, with many of working in regular jobs along with attending courses. For students, the level of stress induced from academic demands conflicting with familial or other outside demands can disrupt the balance and may create a stressful environment (Ragsdale, Beehr, Grebner, & Han, 2011). In a traditional setting, students are required to attend classes and conduct work around specified hours. This demand for physical presence can cut into family/personal time or time spent working. Online universities have eliminated the need to attend class at any specific time, freeing up students to arrange their days around what they need to accomplish personally. In doing so, online curriculum could lead to a better quality of life for students since the stress from obligatory attendance is removed, and valuable time is added back to the student's life, thereby possibly increasing overall life satisfaction.

This chapter discusses the research and analytical methodology used to investigate perceptual differences of overall life satisfaction in graduate students from different educational formats. Reasoning for the research as well as for the target population is offered. The tests, surveys, and delivery methods are also discussed. Data collection and analysis methods are detailed followed by a final comment on participant protection.

## **Problem and Purposes Overview**

With the expanding role distance learning plays in higher education, it is important to determine the best educational model for students. Advancements in technology coupled with increased demand are transforming the landscape of higher education, creating a paradigm shift in the way education is brought to students (Dorin, 2007). The need to understand the effects of distance learning on its consumers is a valid pursuit, even if based solely on the fiscal cost of maintaining the status quo (APA, 2010). The purpose of this study was to examine differences in overall life satisfaction reported from graduate students from an online university and a brick-and-mortar university through a quantitative approach. Based on the tenets of work-life balance theory (McMillan, Lane, & Atchley, 2011), students of online universities were expected to exhibit statistically significant different levels of life satisfaction than similar students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university because they have increased flexibility to construct relationships and personal lives without the encumbrances of forced class time. The method employed in this research was quasi-experimental due to the high external validity (Creswell, 2009). Participant groups were selected from participant pools at available universities: Walden University (WU) for the online representation and Old Dominion University (ODU) as the example of a traditional brick-and-mortar institution.

## **Research Question and Hypotheses**

An increase in overall life satisfaction has been observed in teleworkers (Golden et al., 2006), but little research has been conducted on how distance learning and online

education affects the overall life satisfaction of students. For this study, the specific research question was as follows: Do graduate students attending a completely online university report a statistically significantly higher overall satisfaction with life compared to similar students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university? The null and alternative hypotheses were as follows:

$H_0$ 1: There will be no significant difference in the level of overall life satisfaction perceived among graduate students attending an online university when compared to graduate students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university.

$H_1$ 1: Perceived levels of overall life satisfaction will be significantly different for graduate students attending an online university than similar students attending traditional brick-and-mortar universities.

Research in the field of work-life balance and life satisfaction supports the notion that increased autonomy in workers yields a better-rounded and contented employee (Golden et al., 2007). Because students report similar stresses from attending school as work, for example, fitting in social demands and balancing family obligations with the demand of academic time (Mosca & Paul, 2010), the hypotheses examined in this study should yield similar results as those studies that focused on telecommuting.

### **Population and Sample**

Participant groups were selected from participant pools at available Walden University for the online representation and Old Dominion University as the example of a traditional brick-and-mortar institution. Sample size was determined from the overall respondents to the convenience sampling from each institution. Due to the potential for

more consistent work-life balance conflicts, the population for this study was graduate students from universities allowing participation in this study. A demographic filter was applied to the participants after the survey to separate undergraduates from graduate students. An a priori power analysis using a power of .80 was conducted. Using GPower 3.1.3, a downloadable statistical power analysis calculator (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), I determined that 64 participants from each university were needed for a total of 128 required participants for this study. This number represents a desired statistical power level of .80 or greater, a .05 probability level, and a .50 effect size. No inducements were offered. Participants filled out the survey on their own as directed from their school's participant-pool website. Information for each university was acquired from speaking to the research centers at both universities. Both males and females from all cultures available through volunteered participation were surveyed with no restriction to education level, provided they were allowed in the study by the institution. Data for these fields were collected in the form of a demographic questionnaire to note any patterns that emerged. As mentioned in Chapter 1, certain assumptions about the surveyed population were made. They are as follows:

1. Respondents answered truthfully and without biases at each level of the survey.
2. The Diener et al. (1985) SWLS served as a highly reliable and valid instrument with which to gauge perceptions of overall life satisfaction.
3. The survey platform used was easy to access and operated efficiently so as not to dissuade objective participation.
4. Participants represented a cohort of similar social and educational values.

### **Data Collection and Instrumentation**

Using Survey Monkey, an electronic survey program, as the instrument delivery method, participants logged on through their respective university portals for the research center's participant pool and testing website. Electronic survey methods have been shown to offer more participant flexibility, improve the overall response rate, and reduce researcher costs involved in surveying participants (Al-Omiri, 2007; Brown, Olsen, & Wygant, 2004). The survey should have taken no more than 5 minutes to complete.

Participants were given two questionnaires. The first was a demographic questionnaire breaking down specific participant attributes for possible future analyses (see Appendix A). The second survey was the SWLS (Diener et al., 1985), discussed in detail in Chapter 2. The SWLS is a noncopyrighted, public domain instrument that requires about 1 minute of the respondent's time (Diener et al., 1985). Diener et al. stated that few surveys examined total life satisfaction. Most were subjective in nature, focusing on certain aspects of life such as coping with injury or aging and were not applicable to larger demographics globally. The SWLS was designed to examine the notion and appreciation of overall life satisfaction free from participant bias or subjective interpretation. Based on its extensive use and high validity and reliability (Diener et al., 1985; Joo et al., 2011; Laranjeira, 2009), the SWLS was a strong choice as an analytical tool for this survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Participants responded to the SWLS by choosing from a scale indicating corresponding level of agreement. The 7-point scale is: 1 = *strongly disagree*; 2 =

*disagree*; 3 = *slightly disagree*; 4 = *neither agree nor disagree*; 5 = *slightly agree*; 6 = *agree*; and 7 = *strongly agree*. Scoring for each item was from 1 to 7, with 5 indicating low satisfaction and 35 representing highest overall life satisfaction (Diener et al., 1985, p. 72). Instructions for administering the scale as well as a sample of the survey are included in Appendix B.

Using SPSS, the Mann-Whitney U-Test was selected because two different groups of people were surveyed: those participants attending an online university and those participants attending a brick-and-mortar university. The nonparametric nature of the Mann-Whitney U-Test (because of the availability of participants) and the ordinal nature of the SWLS made the Mann-Whitney U-Test the appropriate choice. Participants used for this survey indicated whether they were graduate or undergraduate students and whether they attended a brick-and-mortar or an online university. Failure to declare student and university status and to fully complete the SWLS disqualified them from this study. No other demographics were used for this survey, but additional demographic data were collected for possible future analyses. The design was an ex post-facto between group comparison over one dependent variable. The use of a Likert-style survey yielded responses that represent the participants' subjective understanding of the rankings. While the SWLS has been shown to be very valid and provides suitable equidistance among responses, the utility of a parametric analysis was not as suitable as the more amorphous nonparametric tool (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Because this study involved comparing the levels of overall life satisfaction between two groups, all scores for the continuous variables were converted to ranks across the groups. An evaluation of the significance of

the observed variance was then conducted. Because of the ranking, actual score distribution was not of paramount importance to the analyses (Pallant, 2010).

### **Protection of Participants**

To take the electronic survey, participants had to register and receive a logon and password through their school's research participation portal. This method rendered the researcher or anyone else unable to match survey responses with participants. Participants were able to take this survey or later surveys at their leisure and log on to their account to view statuses and upcoming studies. Responses were sent to me for analysis with no more than a code attached to the response as a marker. This code was not able to be traced back to individual participants. There were no other ethical considerations because the study's parameters address reports of overall life satisfaction and the demographic questionnaire was completed without the researcher knowing anything about any of the respondents. Data was stored on a password protected server. No data were collected for the study until I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board to conduct the study (approval #05-03-12-0154599).

### **Summary**

Examining self-reports of overall life satisfaction among graduate students, although limited to only a couple of institutions, should provide insight into the effect distance learning has on society in general. This trending toward technological advances in learning present a paradigm shift in how education will be offered in the future (Dorin, 2007). Students at this level have the representative balance in life to provide results indicative of a normal adult attempting to balance school, family, social obligations, and



work dictates (Peluso, Carleton, Richter, & Asmundson, 2011). By understanding how satisfaction with life can be affected through the choice of educational format, programs can be designed to provide a consistent level of education through seamless integration with the students' lives. Implications for business and telework models should align closely with the implications in this study (Golden, 2007). Through the filtering ability of the demographic survey, future work can analyze further defined cohorts and look for patterns or anomalies indicative of cultural, gender, or social issues.

Chapter 4 examines perceived overall life satisfaction among graduate students between the two university platforms. Using the demographic questionnaire and the SWLS, participants were scored and ranked according to their responses and then filtered against school type. The results support or reject the null hypothesis and demonstrate directionality of the research. Analysis of these results is offered and adds to a growing body of research in the fields of distance learning and telecommuting.

## Chapter 4: Results

This study was conducted to examine the influence school choice, online versus traditional, has on perceived overall satisfaction with life of graduate students. Several demographics were collected for future use. These responses were not used in the testing for this study yet may offer some insight into the direction of the findings. Appendix A provides the actual demographic survey. Appendix B shows the SWLS as administered.

This online quantitative survey study investigated the following research question: Do graduate students attending a completely online university report a statistically significantly higher overall satisfaction with life compared to similar students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university? It also held the following hypotheses:

$H_01$ : There will be no significant difference in the level of overall life satisfaction perceived among graduate students attending an online university when compared to graduate students attending a traditional brick-and-mortar university.

$H_11$ : Perceived levels of overall life satisfaction will be significantly different for graduate students attending an online university than similar students attending traditional brick-and-mortar universities.

The remainder of this chapter will go over the results yielded.

### **Response Rate**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, 64 graduate students from each university were needed in order to achieve a statistical power level of .80 or greater, a .05 probability level, and a .50 effect size. A campus-wide email was sent to all Old Dominion University (ODU) students everyday for 2 weeks until the needed number was achieved.

This study was also placed on Walden's participant portal with an email sent out on the first of each month alerting students to visit the portal and participate in the offered studies. It took approximately one month to get the needed participants from Walden to continue. The difference in participation rate was largely due to the method of procuring students. ODU sent a daily email to the entire student body, while Walden sent out a reminder to the student body once monthly. Utilizing Survey Monkey, an online survey website, as the collection device, all participants who declared as graduate students and who completed 100% of the SWLS were included, resulting in 147 participants, 65 from Walden University (the online curriculum), and 82 from Old Dominion University (the traditional or "physical" curriculum). In total, 151 participants began the survey, but only 147 completed all required sections to be admitted, providing a 97.4% response rate for adequate completion. This response rate in part was due to each question being arranged to require an answer before continuing. Those who failed to meet the requirements simply stopped the survey, deciding to go no further. Also the overall length and time required most likely played a role in the high level of completed surveys.

### **Demographics**

The only demographic considered in this study's findings was that the participants be graduate students experiencing either a 100% "online" or a 100% "physical" curriculum. Any respondent who reported as a hybrid student or as an undergraduate was omitted. All other demographics were omitted from examination. Demographic information was collected for use in future examinations. Information obtained is also

useful in sample description. Aspects of this questionnaire are discussed to provide context for the study and to allude to the presence of confounding variables.

Because the information was easy to obtain, analysis of potential relationships among variables may yield interesting findings. For this research, investigation of these relationships is beyond the scope of the study, so only student status and school types were analyzed. Table 1 offers a breakdown of the demographic questionnaire responses. The participants were predominantly female (71% for the physical sample and 84% for the online sample). There was also a discrepancy regarding race. For the physical sample, 79% were white. The online population showed that 49% were White and 37% were Black. Preliminary analyses of potential skewing as a result of gender and/ or racial differences showed that there may be some significant differences among the different cohorts on reported levels of overall life satisfaction. However, there were not enough participants in each group to attain the appropriate power level to run a true analysis. Other differences were observable, such as participants' age and number of children. This demographic disparity underscores the utility of a future study, which could look into the influence of these differences on the results.

Table 1.

*Demographic Criteria across Attendance Type*

	Online Attendance	Physical Attendance	Hybrid Attendance
Participants	65	82	40
Part-time Student	0	0	18
Fulltime Student	44	82	22
Male	10	24	12
Female	55	58	28
White	32	65	28
Black	24	6	8
American Indian/Alaskan	0	0	0
Asian	1	4	3
Pacific Islander	0	0	0
Multiple Races	7	3	1
Other Race	1	4	0
17yrs or Less	0	0	0
18-25yrs	0	31	7
26-30yrs	6	9	5
31-35yrs	11	10	7
36-40yrs	12	4	5
41-45yrs	10	8	6
51orOlder	13	13	4

	Online Attendance	Physical Attendance	Hybrid Attendance
No Children at Home	13	56	17
One Child	10	5	6
Two Children	21	10	8
Three Children	7	7	4
Four or More Children	14	4	5
No Children	0	0	0
Under 18	24	12	13
Over 18	18	13	6
Under & Over 18	10	1	4
Children Reside with you	16	16	19
Children Reside with Other	17	9	4
Employed Under 40hrs	0	0	0
Employed Over 40hrs	39	21	16
Not Employed/Looking	2	6	1
Not Employed/NotLooking	3	10	3
Retired	0	2	1
Disabled	1	0	1
Married	0	0	0
Unmarried	12	41	12
Divorced	14	9	3
Widowed	5	1	0

## Findings

Chapter 2 presented statistics on the SWLS in detail. The test-retest correlation coefficient was .82 with the coefficient alpha being .87, providing support for the SWLS being a valid psychometric instrument (Diener et al., 1999). To bolster this claim, Vassar (2008) conducted a meta-analysis from more than 60 studies regarding the reliability of the SWLS as a valid and consistent instrument across a plethora of different sample characteristics.

Using SPSS, each participant's SWLS score was totaled. The nonparametric Mann-Whitney U Test was used to compare differences among the two groups. As mentioned in Chapter 3, the nonparametric nature of the test, the availability of participants, and the ordinal nature of the SWLS make the Mann-Whitney U-Test the appropriate choice. Given the significance level ( $p$ ) of  $p = .027$  (see Table 2). The probability value ( $p$ ) is less than or equal to .05 for the participant's SWLS score. Therefore, the Mann-Whitney U test did reveal a significant difference in the perceived overall satisfaction with life of graduate students from traditional brick-and-mortar schools ( $Md = 27, n = 82$ ) and online schools ( $Md = 25, n = 65$ ),  $U = 2099.500$ ,  $z = -2.210$ ,  $p = .027$ ,  $r = -.18$ . A small effect size of -.18 (Cohen, 1988) was discovered using the formula shown in Pallant (2010, p. 230).

The null hypothesis was rejected with the findings showing that graduate students attending traditional brick-and-mortar or "physical" classes had a higher perceived overall satisfaction with life than graduate students attending courses in a strictly online

format. This conclusion answers the research question in that students attending an online curriculum do not experience a higher level of perceived overall life satisfaction. In fact, they report a lower level of perceived life satisfaction. Compared to *t* tests, the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U test has a higher likelihood for Type I errors, or falsely rejecting the null. This occurrence is amplified when the groups studied have a large degree of variance or show heteroscedacity (Nachar, 2008). A Bonferroni or Holm sequential Bonferroni adjustment can be used to reduce the probability of such errors, but this adjustment is usually done when examining significance levels across two or more levels (Holm, 1979). This study is only looking at OLS as a whole and is not looking at line item differences. To keep similarity high among the groups, respondents were filtered according to graduate student status and school type. Other unfiltered items such as family support, socioeconomic status, and cultural influences were not examined, which could cause an increase in heteroscedasticity.

Although the effect size was small, a significant difference was observed, which demonstrates some interaction amongst the variables. Table 2 breaks the SWLS into its individual questions and significance levels (Q1-5). Table 3 shows the overall score ranks of each line item. While the overall SWLS scores presented significant findings, not all of the specific items yielded significant differences among the two groups. For example, Q1 shows a significance level of .449, while Q3 is .004. This fluctuation in scores may be due to the participant's interpretation of the survey question. Simple wording changes, for example, can lead to large swings in meaning from one participant to the next (Diener et



al., 1985). In this study, however, interpretation differences were not likely an issue due to the similarity of the two groups.

Based on the research, difference in line item responses was anticipated, and the reliability and validity was based on the overall total item correlation present in the survey, not because of item symmetry. The SWLS was originally constructed with 48 line items. These were narrowed down after tests for redundancy, and interpretation reduced the survey to its five-item design (Diener, et al., 1985). The difference in reactions to the different line items possibly denotes the participant's particular understanding of the questions intent or meaning. Because the scale was/is not designed to measure reactions on an individual item level, the responses should be examined as a whole. Observing the item differences is important and may indicate a need for a qualitative follow up to gauge true participant sentiment.

Table 2

*Mann-Whitney U Test Statistics*

SWLS Questions 1-5 and Total SWLS Score Statistical Significance

	Q1: In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	Q2: The conditions of my life are excellent.	Q3: I am satisfied with my life.	Q4: So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	Q5: If I could live over, I would change almost nothing.	Participant's SWLS Score
Mann-Whitney U	2480.000	2313.500	1967.500	2158.000	2176.500	2099.500
Z	-.756	-1.422	-2.869	-2.061	-1.934	-2.210
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.449	.155	.004	.039	.053	.027
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)	.451	.156	.004	.039	.053	.027
Exact Sig. (1-tailed)	.226	.078	.002	.020	.027	.013

- a. Grouping Variable: Online or Physical Attendance  
 b.  $p < .05$

Table 3

*SWLS Question and SWLS Score Ranks*

SWLS Questions 1-5 and SWLS Total Score	Online or Physical Attendance	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Q1: In most ways my life is close to my ideal.	Online	65	71.15	4625.00
	Physical	82	76.26	6253.00
	Total	147		
Q2: The conditions of my life are excellent.	Online	65	68.59	4458.50
	Physical	82	78.29	6419.50
	Total	147		
Q3: I am satisfied with my life.	Online	65	63.27	4112.50
	Physical	82	82.51	6765.50
	Total	147		
Q4: So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.	Online	65	66.20	4303.00
	Physical	82	80.18	6575.00
	Total	147		
Q5: If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.	Online	65	66.48	4321.50
	Physical	82	79.96	6556.50
	Total	147		
Participant's SWLS Score	Online	65	65.30	4244.50
	Physical	82	80.90	6633.50
	Total	147		

Overall, school course format may influence the way graduate students perceive their overall satisfaction levels. Understanding why course format may cause an influence should provide some insight into what universities need to do to increase the student

experience. Chapter 5 addresses the potential reasons for this increased focus as well as the implications and future study of this phenomenon.

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## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Students are increasingly seeking out web-based education formats. Up to 20% of college students have at least one class online, and this number has seen a 10% annual growth (Allen & Seaman, 2007). With this continued shift, understanding any change among students due to this new learning format is important to understanding positive market growth. One factor examined in this study was the concept of perceived overall life satisfaction among students from an online university and among students at a traditional brick-and-mortar university. By having a reduction in required class time and greater autonomy over their day-to-day lives, online graduates were hypothesized to report significantly higher levels of OLS.

As technology advances, the opportunity to expand interests and seek out new and interesting means to fill downtime expands naturally due to the lower demand for physical labor or even physical presence (Dorin, 2007; Howell et al., 2003). Social and organizational psychologists have studied the effects of reduced office time and increased job autonomy and their effects on employee job stress and work performance (Shabi, 2000). With technology replacing the necessity to be present for many functions historically required by businesses, a paradigm shift in how this work-life balance may be achieved and subsequently increase life satisfaction is underway (Howell et al., 2003). The current study looked at the presence of any significant difference in levels of OLS among graduate students. Because of the different application requirements, this area of study may provide direction for the growth of the telecommuting or distance learning

field by illuminating a difference among distinct groups, those that attend a traditional university and those that chose a distant-learning format. This chapter provides an overview of the philosophy, purpose, and methodology of the study. It also discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future work in the field.

### **Philosophy**

The literature reviewed for this study paints a picture of a satisfied person as one that has a high degree of WLB. People tend to gravitate towards less stress-inducing activities, thereby mitigating the negative effects of overwork and over obligation (Zelenski et al., 2008). This is especially true with graduate students. They not only have the demands of family and social requirements, often coupled with work necessities, but they also have to attend classes and complete research and assignments. By utilizing existing technological tools, students today can complete entire programs virtually. This flexibility of approach and autonomy over time allows them to allocate formerly required classroom time to activities that they choose. Spillover occurs when work overflows into personal time (Zhao & Rashid, 2010). By having control to manipulate time spent attending academic activities, this spillover could be more tightly controlled by online students, thereby reducing the stress of the spillover or at least providing a means to compartmentalize the tasks.

Studies have shown that increases in autonomy in the workplace such as shift design or telecommuting often increases job satisfaction, employee retention, and productivity (Ng, 2006). Distance learning should enhance the student experience and provide much needed relief from physically attending courses.

### **Purpose**

As with any business, universities have an obligation to produce revenue or face closure. Much of the revenue production is done by attracting students through new and innovative programs aimed at being competitive and groundbreaking. This study looked at the perceived levels of overall satisfaction with life among students from both an online school and a traditional school to note any significant differences among the populations. The idea of this research was based on the needs of the graduate student. Academic demands are only the beginning of what many students face. Obligations to family, friends, and work also impact the daily lives of students. An online curriculum provides a format that eliminates one area of required physical attention, thereby allowing students to refocus that allotted time as they choose (Dorin, 2007). By comparing the reported overall satisfaction with life of graduate students attending either a completely online program or one that required physical attendance, information was gathered indicating the affect program choice has on perceived levels of OLS.

### **Procedures**

As detailed in Chapter 3, participants were recruited from Walden University and Old Dominion University. They were provided a link to an online survey using Survey Monkey to facilitate the questionnaire. I used the demographic questionnaire to filter participants to graduate students taking completely online or completely traditional courses. As a result, respondents were limited to 65 online students and 82 traditional or “physical” students. These numbers met the needed number for adequate power. Scores

from the SWLS were collected. Using the Mann-Whitney U Test, the two groups were separated, and their SWLS totals were analyzed for significant differences.

### **Findings and Conclusions**

While the literature suggests that online students should exhibit higher levels of OLS, findings in this study show that students attending a traditional university are more satisfied with their life than those attending an online school. The hypothesis reflected my interest in obtaining a significant difference in either direction. Findings reported in Table 1 reveal that traditional students reported a significantly higher level of OLS than the online students. Although the effect size was small ( $r = -.18$ ), it was still large enough to represent a statistically significant difference. These results indicate that academic curricula, whether online or in a traditional setting, is important. According to this survey, more students experience higher levels of life satisfaction attending traditional universities than those doing it all online. This difference may be mostly due to cultural, gender, or life stress experienced by the different cohorts (Pavot & Diener, 2008; Waumsley, Houston, & Marks, 2010). Studying these dissimilarities should provide insight into the results. The presence of a marked disparity among online and traditional students OLS reinforces the need to understand the reasons behind the score differences.

Most likely this disparity is due to demographic differences such as socioeconomic differences, marital status, family support, or geographic location. Baumeister and Leary (1995) concluded that people seek out activities that bring them closer to others to fulfill a need to belong. This affiliation need could be a powerful motivator in people who do not have the family or social structure in place than those that



may rate online schooling as preferential. In this study, the samples were markedly different from one another in reported levels of OLS, and this demographic dissimilarity could be the reason for the observed differences. This study was meant to observe only an overall significant difference among the two university types. Future research could investigate affiliation needs and university format to compare differences in perceived school fit and levels of satisfaction among students across the different formats.

### **Discussion**

Finding a significant relationship was not surprising. Discovering that traditionally formatted courses yielded higher OLS values than online methods, however, was unexpected, and contrary to the research hypothesis. This study hypothesized increased OLS for students attending online classes, yet the findings revealed increased OLS for the traditional attendees. Golden et al. (2006) reported, in regards to telecommuting that increases in autonomy and personal time led to more happy, well-adjusted, and productive people. These findings do not reflect this philosophy, at least not entirely. This discrepancy may be due to the nature of graduate school. Park and Peterson (2009) reported that people have a need to feel connected to something larger than themselves. Perhaps this affiliation need is a large component of the results. In an online setting, students interact differently than in a traditional setting. In a live setting, students are able to openly discuss topics, work together, and speak with the instructor in real-time as questions arise. In an online format there are few occasions where students can ask instructors questions in a live format. Opportunities to discuss issues are available, but they are typically in a discussion forum where students post responses or in email format

outside of the class shell. Much, if not all of the learning is done alone, with greatly reduced live interaction or scheduled class time.

A lack of camaraderie through school organizations, life fraternities, campus events, or even just the ability to walk the campus as a member of a specific community may also play a role in reducing satisfaction. If people are considered social by nature, then this socialization need may go a long way in defining the relationship among OLS and school choice. Simply relieving the physical demands of required face time to see a difference in OLS is not expansive enough to understand why OLS scores among students of different school types differ. There seems to be more at play than just format design and student attendance requirements.

The psychology of belongingness is closely attached to human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Walton, Cohen, Cwir, and Spencer (2012) studied the concept of belongingness and how it influenced participants' motivation to perform and to succeed. In particular, their study looked at the role perceived belonging to a particular group played on motivation and self-concept in intellectual communities. They found that belonging to a group described as designed for success in a certain domain led to the participants' working harder with more self-confidence in that area. Baumeister and Leary (1995) also examined the role belongingness plays on self-concept and positive self-regard. They concluded that the need to belong "is a powerful, fundamental, and extremely pervasive motivation" (p. 497). Further examination revealed that those who believe they are not connected to anyone or any particular group have problems with self-identity. They also suffer from increased pathological issues such as eating disorders and

suicide. They also found that individuals need consistent, frequent positive interactions from the same group over a long period of time. Those who do not have a consistent cohort showed lower levels of satisfaction and are less well off than those who have strong support systems and group affiliation.

This theory of social belongingness may be a large part of the reason behind the findings in this research. With online instruction, there is virtually no group affiliation. There are no social engagement opportunities with fellow compatriots. In a traditional setting, students can attend ball games in their school colors. They can attend a variety of events leading way to a social identity. They become a part of something with a much larger reach than just a single student attempting a degree alone; they are a part of a community of like-minded focused individuals who share a common bond. Online universities do not have this same sense of community. The logistics do not allow for true competition. What they offer instead is greater autonomy for students who seek a higher degree but need more flexibility to fit instruction into their lives. This desire for flexibility in and of itself does not make one a better choice over the other; it appears that there are unintended consequences for every decision, regardless how well thought out.

### **Implications for Social Change**

As technology gains a greater foothold on academia, the essence of human psychology needs to be understood. Online universities are booming. Many advertisements offer the ability to get a degree without having to leave the house, or without having to see another human being. In terms of utility and competitiveness, the allure of a self-directed pace may be an excellent opportunity for the university and

students alike. In terms of providing the best experience conducive to high levels of life satisfaction as a result of curriculum choice, completely online programs may not be in a student's best interest. While distance learning may be the perfect solution for someone juggling a family and full-time work, without the benefit of group support from others going through the same thing at the same time, the choice to forgo the traditional experience may lead to increased stress and feelings of isolation (Walton et al., 2012). People have a need to be a part of something larger than themselves (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). While a degree is a tremendous accomplishment, the experiences of meeting at the library to study, arguing a position, or simply attending a university sporting event may have more intrinsic value than the appeal of detached and unbridled learning. As the online universe continues to expand, positive social change is only capable by noticing the effect of change on the target community. In regards to higher education, a paradigm shift is being eagerly adopted. This change carries not only a change in delivery format but a change in mindset that may need some finessing to achieve optimal results. Accreditation is only a part of being a real university; it appears that students need a tangible experience as much as a convenient one.

## **Recommendations**

If the landscape of higher education continues to change, understanding the impact of these changes on students, faculty, and administrators will be important. From predicting future enrollment to profit potential, levels of student satisfaction with these evolving formats can be a precursor to seeing the success or failure of an institutions business model. Because of the limited scope of this study and the importance of the subject to the world of higher academia, recommendations have been made to improve on the current field of study.

### **Recommendations for Further Action**

The results of this survey indicate a significant anomaly among two distinct groups of students. Institutions of higher learning need to pay particular attention to human social dynamics when implementing any online course. Innovation is a great asset in improving cultures but can be socially irresponsible if done without regard to unintended consequences.

Students seeking higher education should also be knowledgeable of what they are pursuing. Students responding to advertisements offering easy courses or degrees without requirements should consider the impact that choice will have long-term. Aside from vetting the accreditation of the university, it appears to be important to consider the social benefits students experience through traditional learning.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study only looked at a limited number of students from two universities. The demographics also only revealed graduate students that were either reportedly completely

“online” or “physical” students. The prospects for future study are almost limitless. First, examining the differences among races, genders, and social-economic statuses would be useful in seeing trends. Looking at some of the obvious demographic trends presented in Chapter 4, there were far more females than male respondents in both groups. However, the majority of participants from ODU, the traditional university were 18-25 years old, with no children and unmarried. Walden, the online university, showed two or more children, were either married or divorced, and were 31- 45 years of age. These differences could denote strong manifestations of life stress differences, which not only depicts key differences in the study make-up but perhaps of the student bodies as well. These differences could easily act as confounding variables creating the differences observed in the SWLS scores.

Another factor is the inherent design of online learning versus traditional learning. Online universities have the ability to be omnipresent. Instant connectivity with the virtual classroom allows different cultures from anywhere with an internet connection to attend. Unique social customs may play a part in reports of OLS. Many land-based institutions have a community built around the university, and those communities are referred to as “college towns” for a reason. This sense of belonging and group affiliation may go a long way in influencing perceived OLS. Looking at student differences from the same university would be of greater use than comparing two completely different organizations. Another needed addition would be a qualitative survey on which students could provide responses to what being a part of a particular university meant to them. This information could be used in conjunction with the qualitative data to develop a

better more well-rounded interpretation of the students' experiences. The goal should be in finding overlaps in the reports. Simply looking at one aspect of a phenomenon is not enough to discern a true understanding of its impact. Investigation into these population differences is warranted and should yield vital data into the student body make-up and its role in overall life satisfaction levels. Understanding these differences is fundamental in understanding the paradigm shift among students and the workforce as we move farther into a web-based learning environment.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the human experience of online education and how this shift in implementation is different from the traditional format of attending classes at a brick-and-mortar university in regards to students' perceived OLS. While change is often inevitable, it is of paramount importance to not lose one's humanity in the process of that change. This field of study has a long way to go before any substantive value or insight can be wrought, but it is a worthwhile pursuit because the merging of humanity and machine seems to be approaching at an alarming rate.

As humans progress as a species, certain advancements will occur. Many of these will be on purpose to ease way of life or to increase efficiency in some domain. If history is any teacher, these changes will bring about unintended consequences. These unintended consequences can provide opportunities for both serendipitous discovery and rapid growth and development. The shift from traditional education to distance learning is just such a field. While it may be a prosperous and enticing venture for all involved, long-term success may be tied directly to old time constructs such as group affiliation

needs and multicultural value systems. The future of distance learning is unfolding with each new semester. Understanding its influence on the student experience may provide insight needed not only for its increased attraction but also for the stability and growth of telecommuting as a whole.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent and Confidentiality Statement

This voluntary survey consists of two parts and should take no more than five minutes to complete in full. By completing this survey, participants allow the researcher full access to all of the responses for this study and any future studies. Information gained from this study will be used to gauge overall levels of life satisfaction among college students. All responses are completely confidential. Due to the electronic survey format, there is no way for the researcher to link any of the participants from their responses. All results will be stored in a password protected server for analysis at a later date. There is a key at the end of the survey that will enable participants to view their individual results if interested.

### Participant Demographic Questionnaire

Please select the response as it best relates to you.

**Are you a/ an:**

Undergraduate Graduate

Student Student

**University Type**

Online Physical

Attendance Attendance

**Student Status**

Part-time

Full-time

**Gender**

Male

Female

**Age**

18-25

26-30

31-35

36-40

41-45

46+

**Race/ Ethnicity**

American

Asian

Black or

Native

White

Multiracial

Indian or

African

Hawaiian

Alaska

American

or Other

Native

Pacific

Islander

**Relationship Status**

Unmarried

Married

Divorced

Widowed

**Family Type**

                      

No      One      Two      Three      Four+

Children    Child    Children    Children    Children

**Employment Status**

                

Unemployed    Employed    Full-time    Retired

Part-time    Employed

Please proceed to the next and final section of the survey.

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### Appendix B: The Satisfaction with Life Scale

Below are five statements that you may agree or disagree with. Using the 1 – 7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. **Please be open and honest in your responding.**

7 – Strongly agree

6 – Agree

5 – Slightly agree

4 – Neither agree nor disagree

3 – Slightly disagree

2 – Disagree

1 – Strongly disagree

**In most ways my life is close to my ideal.**

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

**The conditions of my life are excellent.**

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

**I am satisfied with my life.**

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

**So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.**

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

**If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.**

<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

Add up your results and see where you are in the following list.

**Total Score: \_\_\_\_\_**

35 – 31 - Extremely satisfied

26 – 30 - Satisfied

21 – 25 - Slightly satisfied

20 - Neutral

15 – 19 - Slightly dissatisfied

10 – 14 - Dissatisfied

5 - 9 - Extremely dissatisfied

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