Understanding Support Systems of Online Graduate Students

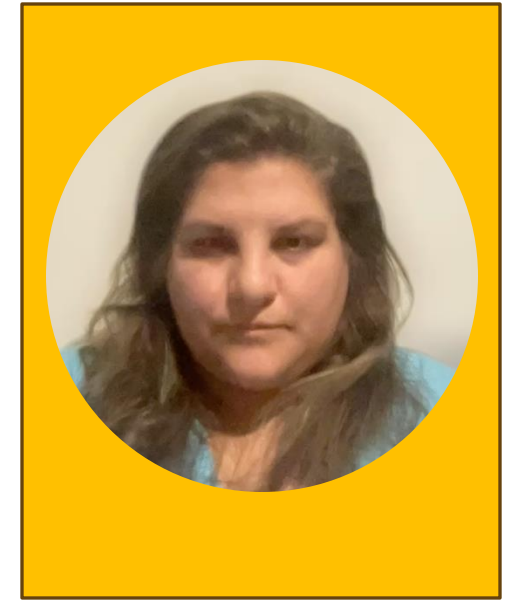BETHANY PERRY

# Introduction

Research Purpose

- Purpose Statement
  - The purpose of this case study is to understand how online students at Fort Hays State University describe and experience support during their academic journey.
- Significance
  - Online education is growing, growing concerns for students' mental health, changing role of student services in higher educations.
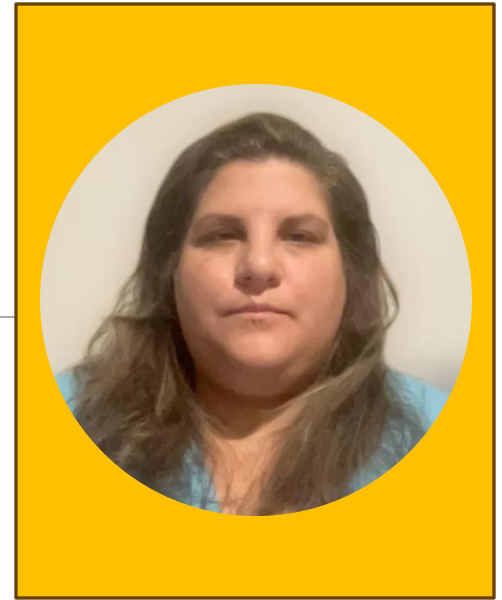
Research Questions

- What are the supports that online graduate students name as priorities in their academic journey?
- In what ways do online graduate students seek and find support from institutional sources?
- In what ways do online graduate students seek and find support from personal or professional sources?
- What gaps in support systems exist for online graduate students?
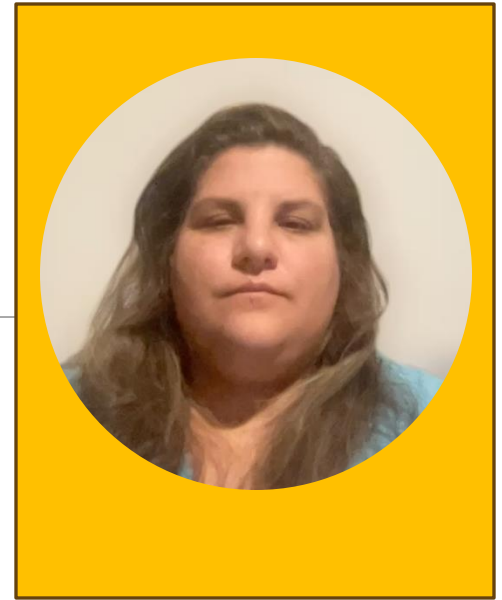
Philosophical Framework

This study aspires to understand how online graduate students at Fort Hays State University recognize and experience support throughout their academic journey, with an emphasis on the types of aid they prioritize and how they find support from institutional, personal, and professional resources. By detecting gaps in support systems, the research looks to inform enhancements in student services, mainly as mental health and student well-being become essential in online education. The discoveries could help restructure support systems to better meet the distinctive needs of virtual students in higher education.
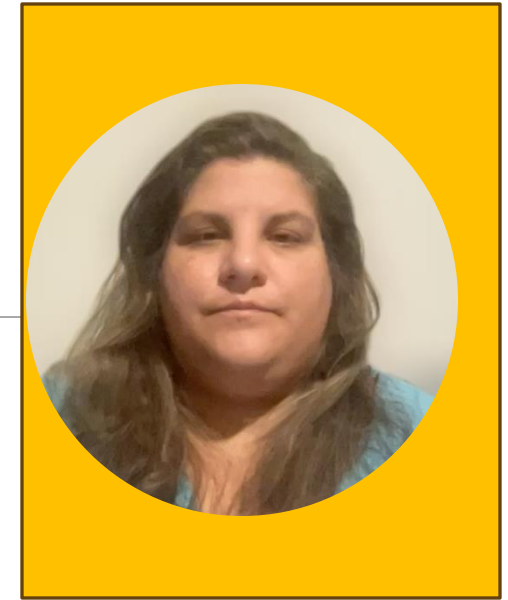
Researcher Reflexivity Statement

Throughout my research on support systems for online graduate students, I brought my own familiarities and identity as both a lifelong learner and a professional involved in supporting others' growth. My experience includes working diligently with individuals in service-oriented positions, where I've directly seen the value of user-friendly and personalized support. This familiarity shapes my belief in the significance of full-bodied support systems, particularly for students traversing the unique challenges of online education. I am aware of my position as a researcher who may naturally view support services with a positive outlook, as I have both benefited from and contributed to support networks in my personal and professional life. Recognizing this, I aim to listen to participants' experiences without expectations, open to support any frustrations or unmet needs they may have. This stance will help me remain open to viewpoints that differ from my own and warrant that the research correctly represents the students' experiences.
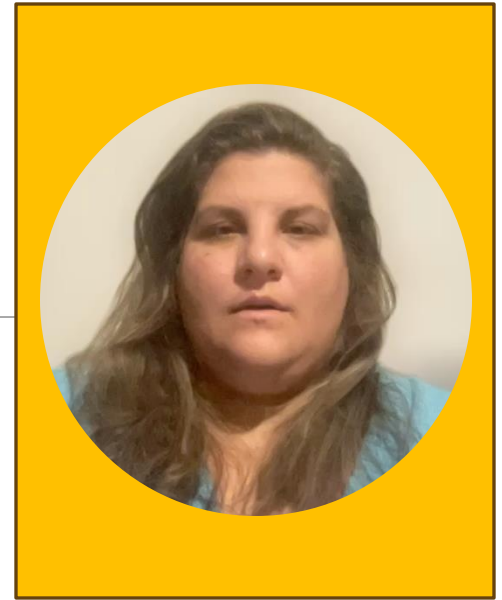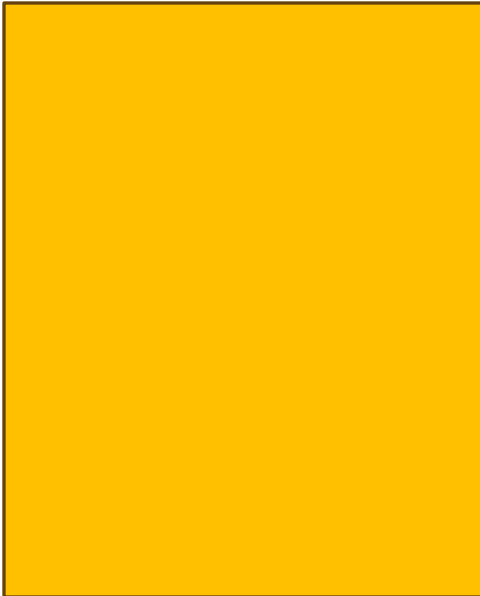
Methodology

Case Study

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a specific example, event, individual, or group, often used to discover complex issues, gain understandings, and cultivate a thorough understanding of the issue. In research and professional situations, case studies study real-life scenarios to recognize patterns, understand relationships, and develop lessons that can be useful in similar circumstances. This method permits a detailed investigation of a single case within its framework, which can deliver valuable qualitative and quantitative understandings.
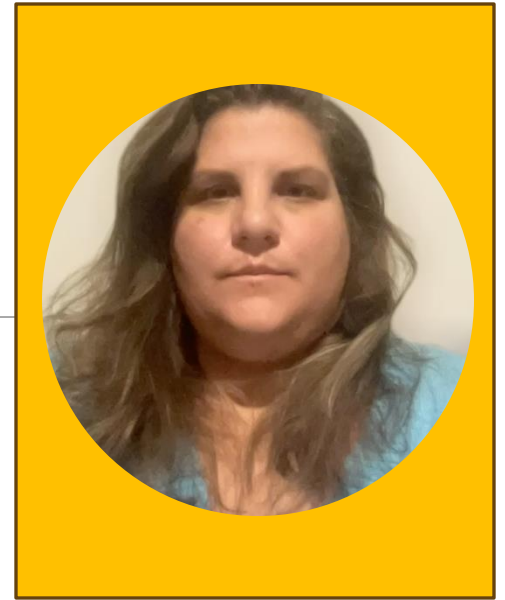
Methods

The approaches of data collection I used in this case study, as described in Bhattacharya (2017), include diverse methods to gather detailed, context-rich information. Key methods include interviews which I used to collect in-depth viewpoints from two participants, interviews can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. I chose to use the semi-structured method. This allowed me to explore individual experiences, opinions, and perceptions relevant to the study's focus. Secondly, I used document analysis to examine my existing interviews along with three other interviews conducted by a peer. These documents were a written transcript of the interviews and were used extract relevant information. Document analysis is valuable for triangulating data and confirming information from other sources. This gave me 5 interviews to work with for my case study and the ability to view the information from numerous viewpoints.
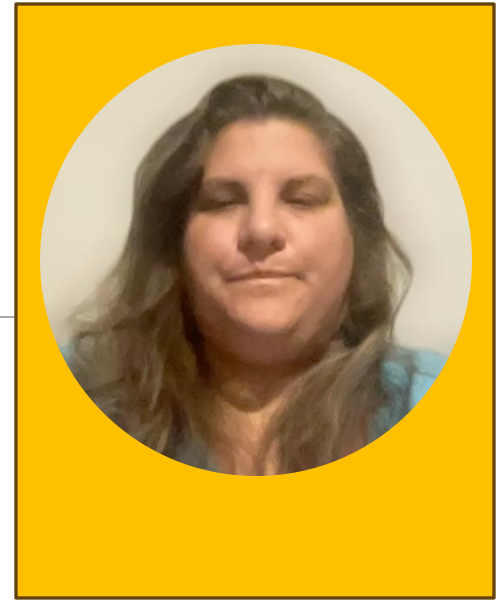
Participants

- Five total participants

- All participants were female

- Race/Ethnicity:
  - Three Caucasian participants
  - One Asian participant
  - One Hispanic participant

- Degree Program:
  - All five enrolled in the Master of Professional Studies and Organizational Leadership degree program

- Domestic or International Student:
  - Three domestic participants
  - Two international participants

Analysis

The analysis method in qualitative research, as described in Bhattacharya (2017), usually includes a systematic coding of transcripts to classify themes, patterns, and insights. Here's a summary of the process:

Transcription: First, audio or video recordings from interviews are transcribed to produce written accounts of the data. This step guarantees that all verbal data is documented for meticulous breakdown.

Coding: Coding is the activity of labeling sections of the transcript with tags or codes that signify certain themes, ideas, or categories. This can be done manually or with the support of qualitative analysis software. Codes are normally derived from the research questions, theoretical context, or patterns that materialize from the data.

Developing Themes: After coding, researchers group codes into wider themes to capture all-encompassing patterns across the data. This thematic grouping permits for a more structured analysis, aiding researchers see relationships and tendencies in participants' replies.

Interpretation: The closing step includes interpreting the themes relative to the research questions and objectives. Researchers get to understand how the recognized themes tackle the core issues of the study, drawing understandings and conclusions that add to the research goals.
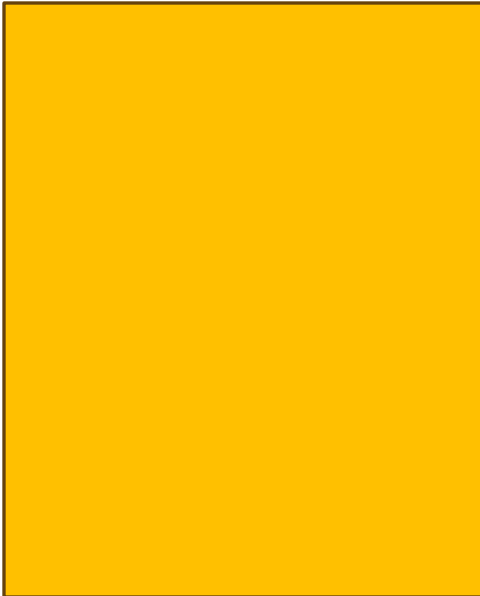
Findings

WHAT DO STUDENTS AT FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY DESCRIBE AND EXPERIENCE SUPPORT DURING THEIR ACADEMIC JOURNEY

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Findings

1.Graduate Studies Expectations and Support: Graduate students often return to school after a break, which can make adjusting to academic expectations challenging. Success requires robust support systems from peers, advisors, or family. Balancing work, life, and academics is crucial, as graduate programs come with distinct expectations compared to undergraduate studies.

2.Intensive Reading and Writing: Graduate programs demand advanced reading and writing skills. If these skills need refreshing, resources like peer reviews, writing centers, or tutoring can help. Effective use of research tools and online resources is essential for preventing plagiarism and enhancing research. Adapting to increased reading demands is also necessary.

3.Using Blackboard as an Educational Tool: Blackboard is essential for online coursework, but it can be overwhelming if unfamiliar. Learning to navigate it well is vital for successful assignment submission. Support from professors, advisors, and peers can ease the adjustment, and meeting advisors before classes start can help set realistic expectations.
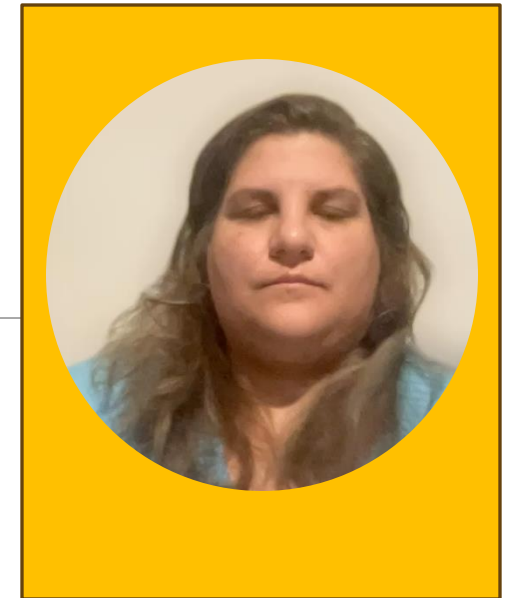
Graduate Studies Expectations and Support

New online students are expected to find resources they need for projects, research studies enrollment and financial aid.

Jennifer says that she can, "seek out support than I did at that age when I was first going to college" This points to an aspect of maturity and experience as student enter graduate school. (Jennifer, 14).

Tammy says that she wants instructors to be clearer in their expectations, "I have a hard time grasping expectations, and I find that sometimes online, that maybe what they're wanting from you can be a little vague , and I like to know pretty much exactly what I need to do, what they're expecting. Expectation management" (Tammy 12).

Nicole points out that, "very minimal support in the use of resources in the library,

there's no like and then there's no orientation" (Nicole 8).

Darla speaks to her lines of support through FHSU, "I would go to my academic advisor. After I would go to a classmate from one of the courses that I have do, ask for help or advice and for advice, third and then I would go to the professor" (Darla, 31).

Intensive Reading and Writing

Most graduate students are not prepared for the increase in reading and increased writing skills they will need as a graduate student.

Ellen states, "I wasn't really prepared for the amount of reading, and I have never been taught to speed...the number of pages that I have to read every week is 200 or more and it's all very academic and very technical" Ellen 9 & 11).

Darla discusses the writing center, "writing center, uh, which is a resource on campus available to students online and in person" (Darla, 33).

Nicole believes graduate students need a, "refresher to you know about on the writing stuff." (Nicole 10).

Jennifer says that she uses the, "virtual Forsyth library for resources."

Tammy discusses her thoughts on plagiarism within the graduate program, "you're not going to do that, right, because it punished. I mean, you're going to lose your money" (Tammy, 43).
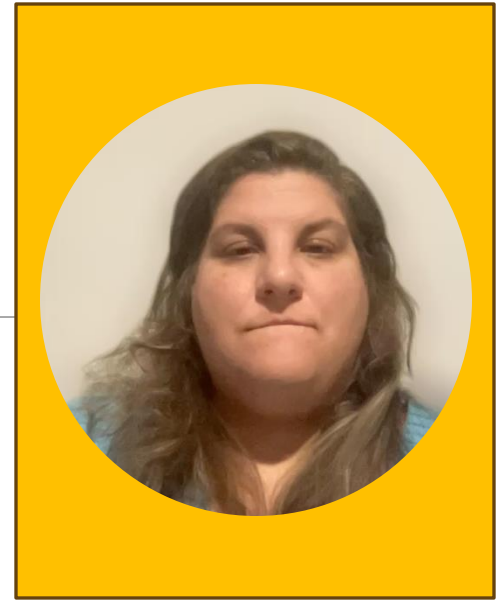
# Using Blackboard as an Educational Tool Alongside Advisors and Instructors

Utilizing technology can be a frustrating process, especially when are trying to ensure communication with classmates and professors. However, technology like Blackboard is just one tool that is available in addition to advisors and instructors.

Ellen says that support can be generalized to, "teachers, library staff, counselors, other students, family, friends and maybe a mentor" (Ellen, 30).

Nicole talks about how online learning could be made more accessible, " if there's like a short video, even on Blackboard to get you on board, to get you familiar, rice yourself with Blackboard, so like, you know, and then little bit activities in Blackboard, including, like, library research, APA, I think that's the, the one thing that I am struggling the most, just the writing support." (Nicole 9).

Darla suggests that "I do think that there's still some effort that can be put to connect students are in the same classes to connect" (Darla, 39).

Tammy believes a mentorship within the graduate school would be beneficial, "mentorship, because I feel like a lot of online students, either it's their first time going back [to school]" (Tammy, 25).
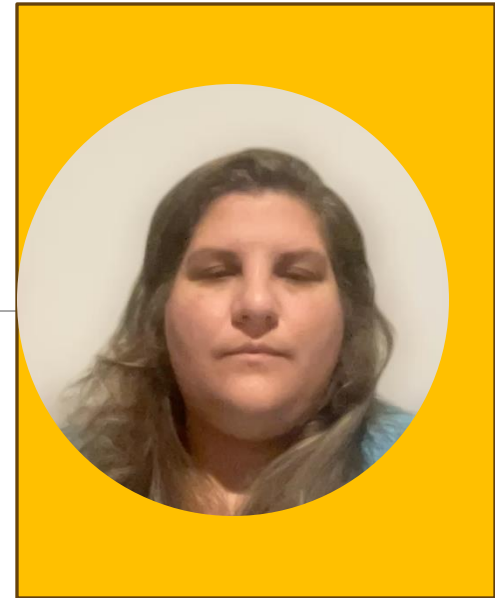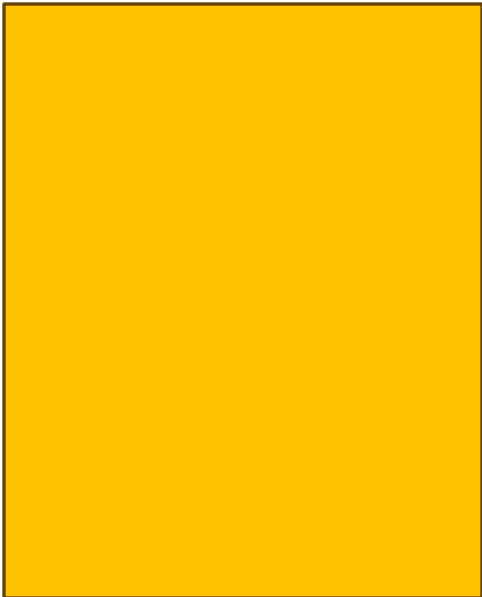
Discussion

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Implications

The findings from this study highlight the critical importance of tailored and accessible support systems for online graduate students.

Enhanced Support Structures:
Institutions need to develop robust academic and technical support tailored to the unique challenges of online learning, including managing Blackboard, adapting to intensive academic demands, and accessing writing and research resources. This matters to **universities and academic staff** who seek to enhance student retention and performance.

Improved Orientation Programs:
Students often struggle with navigating online platforms and understanding academic expectations. Providing comprehensive orientation programs, such as step-by-step tutorials and mentoring initiatives, is vital. These efforts can benefit **new and returning online graduate students** by fostering confidence and preparedness.
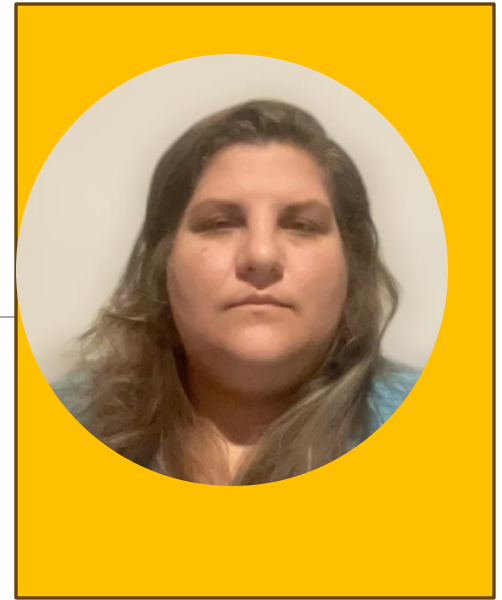
Implications

**Student-Focused Communication**:
Clear and consistent communication from instructors regarding academic expectations can significantly reduce stress and confusion. This is especially important for **faculty** aiming to maintain academic rigor while supporting diverse learners.

Expanded Peer and Mentorship Opportunities:
Establishing peer networks and mentorship programs can help students navigate academic challenges and build a sense of community, reducing feelings of isolation. This matters to **students** and **academic advisors**, as it directly impacts satisfaction and engagement.

Recognition of Diverse Needs:
Graduate students returning to academia after a break may have different levels of preparedness, particularly regarding reading and writing skills. Universities must offer targeted resources such as writing centers and refresher courses, which are critical for **non-traditional and international students**.
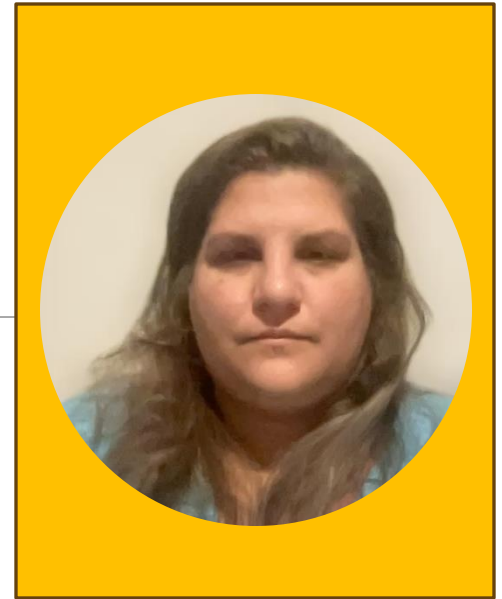
Limitations

1.Small and Homogeneous Sample:

With only five participants, all from the same degree program, the findings may not fully represent the diverse experiences of online graduate students across different disciplines or institutions.

**2.Limited Scope of Data Collection**:

The study primarily utilized semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Broader methodologies, such as surveys or focus groups, could have provided additional insights.

3.Institution-Specific Focus:

The research was conducted exclusively at Fort Hays State University, which limits the applicability of findings to other institutions with different structures and resources.

4.Potential Researcher Bias:

The researcher's background and positive predisposition toward support services may have influenced the interpretation of participants' experiences, despite efforts to maintain objectivity.
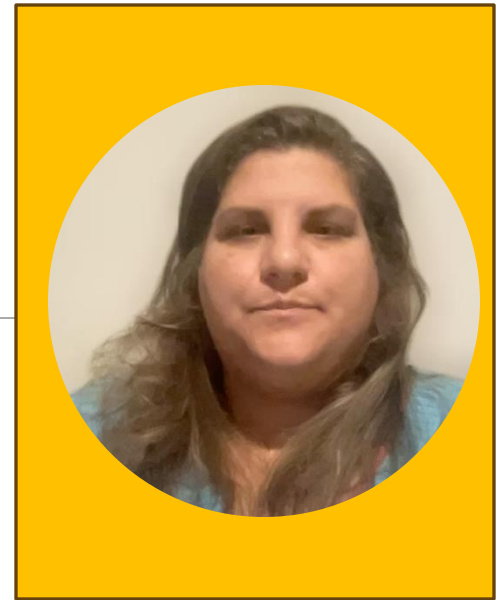
Future Research

**Next Steps in Research**:

As a next step, future research should explore a broader and more diverse group of participants, including students from various academic programs and institutions. This would help identify support needs that are universal and those unique to specific disciplines or student demographics.

Expanded Scope for Larger Study:

If more time and resources were available, a larger study could:

• Include a nationwide sample of online graduate students across different universities and programs.

• Investigate specific subgroups such as international students, non-traditional students, and those with disabilities to understand their unique challenges.

• Examine faculty and administrative perspectives on providing support to online students.
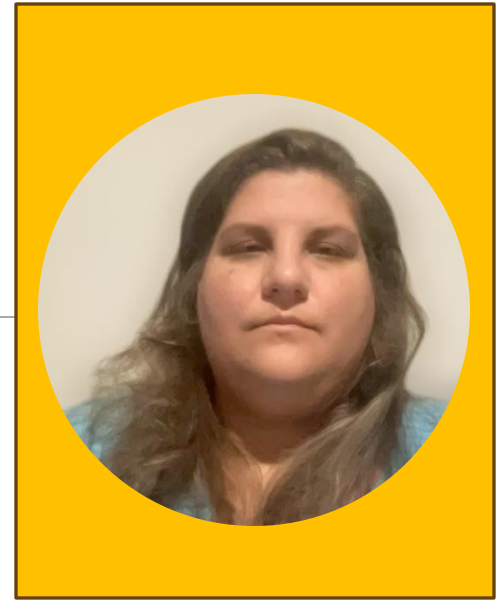
Future Research

**Additional Questions to Explore**:

Future research could address:

• How do online students' support needs evolve over the course of their program?

• What specific challenges do students face when transitioning from undergraduate to graduate-level online education?

• How do cultural and geographic differences impact the perception and effectiveness of institutional support systems?

Different Methodologies or Methods:

To complement the qualitative findings, future research could adopt:

• **Mixed-methods approaches**, combining surveys for quantitative data with interviews or focus groups for qualitative insights.

• **Longitudinal studies** to track students' experiences and outcomes over time.

• **Experimental designs**, such as testing the effectiveness of targeted interventions (e.g., mentorship programs or enhanced onboarding processes) on student success and satisfaction.
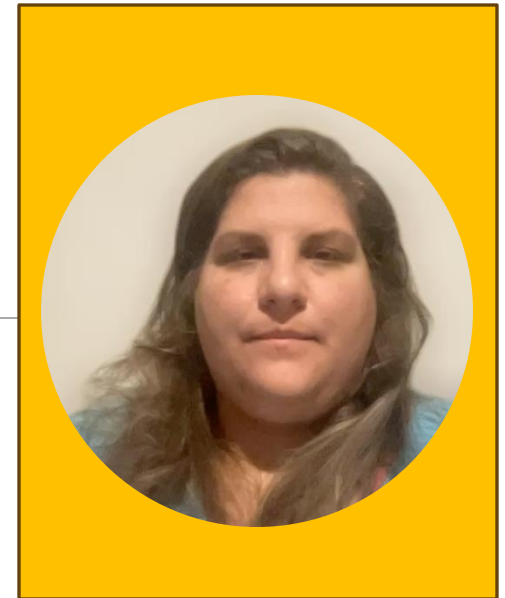
Reflection

THIS RESEARCH REINFORCED THE IMPORTANCE OF PARTICIPANT VOICE AND THE ROLE OF RESEARCHERS AS FACILITATORS OF STORYTELLING. IT ALSO HIGHLIGHTED THE EVOLVING NATURE OF ONLINE EDUCATION AND THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONS TO ADAPT THEIR SUPPORT SERVICES CONTINUOUSLY. MOVING FORWARD, I AIM TO APPLY THESE INSIGHTS IN BOTH ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS, ENSURING THAT RESEARCH CONTRIBUTES TO PRACTICAL AND MEANINGFUL CHANGE.

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Reflection

What I Learned:
This research taught me the value of qualitative methods in uncovering nuanced insights into the lived experiences of online graduate students. I gained a deeper understanding of the challenges students face, such as managing expectations, utilizing technology, and seeking support. It also highlighted the importance of personal, professional, and institutional support systems in fostering student success.

What Was Most Challenging:
The most challenging aspect was managing the potential bias in analyzing data due to my own positive predisposition toward support systems. Remaining objective and open to participants' frustrations and unmet needs required continuous self-awareness. Additionally, working with a small and homogenous sample limited the breadth of perspectives, which added constraints to the findings.
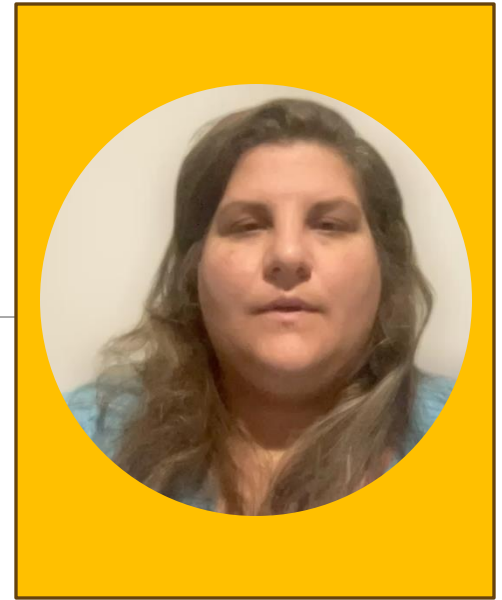
Reflection

How I Might Use Qualitative Research in the Future:
In the future, I plan to use qualitative research to explore areas where complex human experiences play a central role, such as education, mental health, or workplace dynamics. Specifically, it can help inform the design of policies or programs by capturing the voices and needs of those directly impacted.
What Stages of the Research I'd Like to Learn More About:
I would like to deepen my understanding of:
•**Coding and thematic analysis**, particularly how to manage large datasets effectively.
•**Recruitment strategies**, to ensure diverse and representative samples.
•**Mixed-methods integration**, to combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth in future studies.

References

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Bhattacharya, K. (2017). *Fundamentals of qualitative research: A practical guide*. Routledge. [Chapter 2: Terrain and types of qualitative research, pp. 18-20]