

USING MOORE'S TRANSACTIONAL DISTANCE THEORY TO EXAMINE  
SELECTED ONLINE CO-CURRICULAR EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN STUDENT  
AFFAIRS

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**ACADEMIC ABSTRACT**

The ubiquitous nature of digital and social media has had a tremendous impact on higher education. In essence, these new pedagogical media has required faculty members to learn new methodologies to deliver their course content—often through distance education approaches. Transactional Distance Theory, designed by distance research scholar Michael Moore, is the preferred framework for instructional design for distance education. Even though there are examples of student affairs educators teaching students online, there are limited references to distance learning theory as a foundation for the work they are doing.

This study was designed to explore the ways in which two online orientation co-curricular educational opportunities (CCeOs) created for student affairs departments adhere to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. In addition, a secondary purpose was to identify tangible examples that could inform an operationalize definition of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory for application in student affairs online CCeO development and, ultimately, enhance learning efficacy for these online educational programs, which is the purpose of an instructional design theory.

The theoretical framework for this study was Moore's Transactional Distance theory. Document analysis was used to assess and interpret materials from two online orientation programs. The findings of this investigation reveal the existence of two online CCeOs created by, or for, student affairs educators that adhere in significant, although limited, ways to a pedagogical theory traditionally used in online course design.

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**GENERAL ABSTRACT**

Distance education is a growing field. Those responsible for the development of academic courses have sought out theories to guide their practice. Transactional Distance Theory, designed by distance research scholar Michael Moore, is the preferred framework for instructional design for distance education. There are also examples of student affairs professionals teaching students online. However, there are limited references to distance learning theory as a foundation for the work they are doing.

This study was designed to explore the ways in which two online orientation programs created for student affairs departments adhere to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. In addition, a secondary purpose was to identify tangible examples that could inform an operationalize definition of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory for application in student affairs and, ultimately, enhance learning efficacy for these online educational programs, which is the purpose of an instructional design theory.

The theoretical framework for this study was Moore's Transactional Distance theory. Document analysis was used to assess and interpret materials from two online orientation programs. The findings of this investigation reveal the existence of two orientation programs created by, or for, student affairs educators that adhere in significant, although limited, ways to a pedagogical theory traditionally used in online course design.

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

The ubiquity of digital and social media has created tremendous change in higher education (Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Chapman & Henderson 2010; Kruger, 2005; Picciano, 2006). Enrollment in online education has grown to 26% of currently enrolled students and 45 million Americans, including students, use a mobile phone as their primary connection to the Internet (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Duggan & Smith, 2013; Ginder & Stearns, 2014). In addition, according to Calhoun and Green (2015), “almost 90% of all higher education institutions today offer online courses” (p. 55). As these numbers grow, so does the call to incorporate technology into the classroom (Ryan, 2004). The pervasiveness of technology has required traditional brick and mortar campuses to become a hybrid of in-person and digital education. The goal now is to provide opportunities for students to learn whenever and wherever they feel the compulsion (Wong & Looi, 2011). Yet, incorporating technology into a pedagogical approach while also achieving student learning outcomes is not as simple as placing classroom materials online (Picciano, 2006; Ryan, 2005; Smith, 2005).

This move to online courses, for faculty and administrators, is not without its hurdles (Chapman & Henderson 2010). The pedagogy of traditional face-to-face courses does not necessarily translate to digitally-mediated learning environments (Stewart, 1993). For many, there is a need to partner with the instructional design experts in a distance education department to achieve the same student learning they achieved with their traditional practice (Calhoun & Green, 2015). For those without dedicated design staff or funding for training, they are left to their own devices, searching for best practices and theories that will guide the transition of their traditional pedagogical practice to the digital domain (Schmidt & Kaufman, 2005). In this study I will seek to connect Moore’s Transactional Distance theory, a pedagogical philosophy used by distance educators for more than 25 years, to the burgeoning yet sparse field of research dedicated to the connection of student affairs to digital education.

Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory provides the most frequently used instructional design framework for distance education and presents, according to Dron (2005), “an extremely useful generative and descriptive theory of educational activities” (p. 322). In addition, Brindley (2014) states that the “theory of transactional distance is one of the most researched and tested theories in distance education and has had a pervasive impact on the conceptualization of learner

support in helping to reduce the transactional distance between learner and institution and assist learners in successfully developing the necessary skills to negotiate contexts where greater autonomy is required” (p. 291). Transactional distance is a continuous variable that can be observed in the classroom even as the instructor and learner occupy the same physical space (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Moore, 1972; Moore, 1993). Transactional distance is not either present or absent. A student’s transactional distance can move upon a continuum, growing stronger or weaker based upon the instructional design decisions made by the instructor. The transactional distance in a learning environment can be great, even in person, if the instructor is not presenting the material in an optimal manner or the students are not paying attention due to the distraction of personal technology (Moore, 1993). Moore’s theory of transactional distance postulates a psychological divide amplified by the physical distance between the instructor and the learner in a distance learning environment (Moore, 1972; Moore, 1993). As with all continuous variables, transactional distance can be enhanced or lessened based on mitigating factors. Moore identifies three factors intrinsically tied together to lessen transactional distance: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Dron, 2005; Moore, 1972; Moore, 1993).

### **The Learning Paradigm**

Many faculty members who teach distance classes have embraced the integration of technology and identified foundational policy, practice and theory due to the quick acceptance of technology as a platform for teaching (Kane, 2010). Brindley (2014) states, “institutions are generally much quicker to put curriculum online than to develop equally accessible support services” (p. 289). One issue is that it is relatively easy to identify classes taught at a distance. It is more difficult to tease out what types of support is being offered online to students. In the current research there are several labels that are used to identify support offered to students at a distance including “student support” and “learner support” (Brindley, 2014; Brindley & Paul, 2004). Yet, these terms are used primarily to identify the administrative core components of the university (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Shea, 2005; Smith, 2001). The support operations are defined as those that provide the services that grant students the opportunity to gain access to digital information and processes. These operations can include applying to the institution, registration for classes, navigation of financial aid, or access to educational records.

Granting students access to their digital information and processes for the university is important and the development of it first for students educated at a distance has positively

affected traditional students, granting them access to similar services (Shea, 2005). However, student affairs professionals provide more than services. They provide intellectual opportunities that align with the educational purpose of many colleges and universities (Kane, 2010). This educational paradigmatic purpose, which they share with their faculty counterparts, should guide their programmatic success metrics, rather than simply counting the number of programs offered or participants in attendance (Calhoun, 1996).

The learning paradigm aligns the work of student affairs educators with the traditionally academic responsibility of teaching faculty (Brindley, 2014; Calhoun, 1996; Hamrick & Klein, 2015). The theory includes a framework for student affairs educators to use as a guide for creating programs and interactions they are having with students with a more curricular approach (Zeller, 2008). In addition, the learning paradigm connects academic practice to student affairs practice providing direction for integrating intentional learning lessons with the in-class learning that is taking place (Calhoun, 1996; Whitt, 2006) and having the work “more tightly linked with the institution’s strategic academic and economic objectives” (Kvavik & Handberg, 2000, p. 30). Using the learning paradigm, student affairs educators “share responsibility with faculty members, academic administrators, other staff, and students themselves for creating the conditions under which students are likely to expend time and energy in educational-purposeful activities” (Calhoun, 1996, para. 8).

Residential curriculum (Kerr & Tweedy, 2006), outcomes-based learning assessment (Bresciani et al., 2012), and Kuh’s research (2008) are examples of the learning paradigm in student affairs practice. However, these practices and philosophies are being enacted for only students who interact in person with student affairs educators. Unlike their academic counterparts, student affairs educators have limited efforts to blend their traditional practice with their online educational programs. Much of this is due to a lack of critical knowledge in the field of distance education and digitally mediated learning theory by student affairs educators (Cabellon & Junco, 2015).

One traditional method to enacting paradigm shifts in a field is to educate new professionals in the field during their academic coursework (Kleinglass, 2005; Levy, 2003; Moneta, 2005). This is not happening in higher education and student affairs programs. A study by Renn and Zeligman (2005) found that “the individuals charged with providing student services in face-to-face settings - typically student affairs professionals - are not being well

prepared to deal with the challenges of integrating technology and online learners in their work” (p. 547). The past decade has not advanced professional efficacy in this area. As clearly stated in a recent article by Cabellon and Junco (2015), “in a time where technological advances and their impact are ubiquitous on college campuses, the lack of fluency around digital and social technology is significant” (p. 51).

### **Co-Curricular Practice and Distance Education Theory**

In 2005, Dare, Zapata and Thomas (2005) created a list of seven recommendations for student affairs professionals including:

1. Understand the administration of distance learning programs.
2. Understand vocabulary of distance learning.
3. Understand the funding of distance learning programs.
4. Be prepared to advocate for the role of student affairs in distance learning and to educate others about the mission, function, and objectives in student affairs units.
5. Advocate for equal services for students who take courses online and on campus.
6. Develop programs to meet the unique needs of online students.
7. Establish positions with duties focused entirely on the needs of online students.

Yet, as recently as 2015, Cabellon and Junco (2015) argue, “student affairs professionals are ill equipped to meet students where they are” (p. 51). This is not to say that there are no aspects of distance learning theory, specifically Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory, reflected in the work student affairs practitioners are doing today within their online courses and modules.

Student affairs practitioners have been greatly influenced by the use of technology in higher education (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Hamrick & Klein, 2015). According to Whitt and Schuh (2015), “the future belongs to digital technologies” (p. 95). Though the ubiquitous nature of technology has been acknowledged for more than a decade (Kruger, 2005; Zeller, 2008) and a focus on a learning paradigm has been extolled for a similar period, few articles present in student affairs research describe the reason for the approach differing greatly from a belief that technology is important (Rumble, 2000) and no articles were found that examine the learning impact of these digitally mediated practices.

One reason for the hesitance to integrate technology into student affairs practice is a belief by some practitioners that the important ‘high touch’ nature of the field would be lost in the vacuous digital landscape (Coleman et al., 2006). Moore (2003) offers a belief “that the

current exuberance for practicing distance education in the dark, uninformed by theory and research, is tragic, particularly from the point of view of the students who are being served up with programs that fall far short of what informed people should be able to deliver” (pp. 73–74). Finally, Ryan (2004) sums up the outcome from the dearth of theoretical research, stating, “had the earlier designers and managers of online programs heeded the lessons painfully learned during decades of DE theory and practice, much of the attendant disappointment and frustration with online programs [...] could have been avoided” (p. 1).

### **Connecting Scholarship to Practice**

While limited in the research, there are some examples of student affairs educators placing co-curricular educational opportunities online (Brindley, 2014; Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013). For the purposes of the research done here, a co-curricular education opportunity (CCeO) is defined as any non-credit bearing courses, modules, or experiences developed by or in conjunction with student affairs practitioners to educate students outside of the traditional classroom setting. Examples would include a multi-unit online student orientation (Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Smith, 2001), student leadership education (Brindley, 2014; Kane, 2010), digital educational modules for career services (Dahl, 2005; Santovec, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010), online psychological self-assessments and coping skills (Brindley, 1995), and online library information literacy tutorials (Brindley, 2014; Brindley & Paul, 2004; George & Frank, 2004; Smith, 2001). Many of these opportunities have been “cut” from the materials used with students in a traditional brick-and-mortar educational settings and “pasted” into a digital form, with little pedagogical theory undergirding their implementation (Moore, 2003; Shea, 2005; Steele & Thurmond, 2009; Venable, 2010).

Authors have been acknowledging for more than a decade that the impact of technology on student affairs practice is important to study (Dare et al., 2005; Kretovics, 2003; Rumble, 2000; Tull & Kuk, 2012) and regional accrediting agencies have identified student support as imperative to student affairs practice (Dare et al., 2005). While the call for foundational theory and education goes unheard (McClellan & Stringer, 2009; Dungey & Gordon, 2011; Rumble, 2000), it has not hindered student affairs professionals with only basic understanding of technology (Martinez-Aleman & Watman, 2010) from placing their programs online.

There is a dearth of scholarship connecting digital student affairs practices and the theories that traditionally guide the creation of student learning opportunities online. One way to start connecting digital student affairs practice to distance education theory is by ascertaining the extent to which student affairs educators are currently adhering to the three tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy, in the online learning courses and modules they have already created.

According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005), "researchers regard content analysis as a flexible method for analyzing text data" (p. 1277). However, content analysis goes well beyond the domain of textual analysis (Stemler, 2001). While there are few examples, content analysis has been used with success as the methodological approach for research studies in higher education (Creamer & Ghoston, 2012; Kolek & Saunders, 2008). For these reasons a qualitative content analysis may represent a formidable tool for examining online CCEOs that use more than text to present material to students. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) state about the use of content analysis, "sometimes, existing theory or prior research exists about a phenomenon that is incomplete or would benefit from further description" (p. 1281). In this case there is a great deal of research about Transactional Distance Theory but none that links the theory with CCEOs. Mayring's concept of qualitative content analysis has "become standard literature on qualitative content analysis and some regularly appear in new editions" (Kohlbacher, 2006, para. 49). The lack of direct connection with learning theory in online CCEOs offered by student affairs educators makes it difficult to evaluate the nuance of the instructional design model or pedagogical theory used in these environments. To that end, this research attempts to discover the connections that may be present between theory in distance education, specifically the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, and the practice in student affairs education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The ubiquitous nature of digital and social media has had a tremendous impact on higher education (Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Chapman & Henderson 2010; Kruger, 2005; Picciano, 2006). Growth of online enrollment has been followed by an increase in the number of institutions offering distance courses (Duggan & Smith, 2013; Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Calhoun & Green, 2015; Ginder & Stearns, 2014; Venable, 2010). This new pedagogical medium required faculty members to learn new methodologies to deliver their course content (Picciano, 2006; Ryan, 2004; Smith, 2005).

Transactional Distance Theory, designed by distance research scholar Michael Moore, is the most used instructional design frame for distance education (Brindley, 2014). Transactional Distance Theory describes the psychological distance between educator and student as interplay between three variables; dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Moore, 1972; Moore, 1993).

The use of technology in student affairs is prodigious and has influenced both distance and traditional students (Brindley, 2014; Kane, 2010; Shea, 2005). Some student affairs educators have moved beyond the purely transactional use of technology in their work and placed their co-curricular educational opportunities online (Brindley, 1995; Brindley, 2014; Brindley & Paul, 2004; Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Dahl, 2005; George & Frank, 2004; Kane, 2010; Santovec, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010). Even though there are examples of student affairs educators teaching students online, there are limited references to distance learning theory as a foundation for the work they are doing (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). One way to connect distance education theory to the field of student affairs is to examine the extent to which student affairs educators are currently adhering to the tenets of the theory. This research used a qualitative content analysis to examine the educational material that student affairs educators have used for online co-curricular educational opportunities.

### **Purpose Statement**

This study was designed to understand and describe the extent to which the artifacts of online co-curricular educational opportunities created by or in consultation with student affairs educators reflect an adherence to instructional design pedagogical theory for distance education. In addition, I examined the tangible ways Moore's transactional distance tenets were presented in online co-curricular educational opportunities. Moore's Transactional Distance Theory is one of the most used distance learning pedagogical frames. The three variables of Moore's theory – dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy – provide a framework to examine CCEOs offered in student affairs to distance and traditional students.

The basic definitions for the three tenets used during the examination of the materials were taken directly from Moore's theory with special attention paid to the expansion of the definition provided in research conducted by Huang et al. (2015a). The Dialogue coding scheme included learner-instructor and learner-learner interactions. The Structure coding scheme

includes a learner-content component containing flexibility and formality as components as well as a learner-interface component that includes knowledge of media use, choice of media use, visualization, functionality, and usability as components. Learner Autonomy is broken down into the two components of independence of learning and study habits. Finally, a generalization of transactional distance is also provided through learner-instructor and learner-learner transactional distance.

Two examples of digitally mediated orientations were examined as primary examples of online CCEOs. They included one orientation program created for the students enrolled at the online campus of a large research institution and a second example was provided from a community college. Both examples included information available to the general public as well as an orientation module requiring login authentication. The results provided a better understanding of the permeation of Moore's three transactional distance tenets in student affairs practice.

### **Research Questions**

The study examined the following research questions:

1. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory?
  - a. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue?
  - b. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure?
  - c. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments take into account Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy?
2. What tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, present in two online Orientation Programs, can inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs online CCEOs?



## **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant for several campus constituents. One group that might benefit from the results includes student affairs educators who create digitally mediated co-curricular educational opportunities. This study provides a report identifying the extent to which their peers were adhering to a distance learning theory. In so doing, they may be able to use the theory to guide their own development of these online opportunities.

Another group is the students who take these digitally mediated co-curricular educational opportunities. Learner autonomy is a primary tenet of the theory and needs to be understood by the student interacting with the materials. This study provided examples of how these materials influenced the need for more or less learner autonomy to achieve the learning outcomes of the opportunity.

Another group is the staff in distance learning support departments. Currently the examples given for the support of distance learning departments are purely transactional. This research provides a current articulation of adherence to a distance learning theory. This provides opportunities for those responsible for online educational pedagogy support to connect with new constituents for their services.

This study also had significance for future research. For example, this study focused solely on adherence to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. Future studies might tease out the instructional components of the Quality Matters rubric or the Sloan Consortium Quality Framework. Such a study would expand the connection between student affairs practice and distance learning theory.

Another example would be a quantitative examination of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory for a limited number of digitally mediated co-curricular educational opportunities. There are several examples of pre/post surveys given to students in distance courses that identified the amount of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy present in the course. This would add depth to the discourse surrounding the use of distance learning theory in student affairs.

This study focused on the adherence to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory but did not examine the external impacts on that adherence. Quality Matters and the Sloan Consortium Quality Framework along with other frameworks offer practices for developing distance learning at a university. Future studies might examine the structural

support, similar to the support suggested in the development of a department, for student affairs educators.

Finally, the study was significant in terms of future theory. Current research using pedagogical theory in student affairs is singularly focused on face-to-face education and interaction. The present study provides an epistemological connection between student affairs and a distance learning theory, specifically Transactional Distance Theory.

Another way in which the results of the current study might influence future theory is related to the development of student affairs specific theories based upon Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. There have been no cited examples found through this research that acknowledges distance learning theory as the basis for an educational or developmental theory for student affairs practice.

Moore's Transactional Distance Theory is traditionally used with academic courses that are presented with extended iterative outcomes over a period of time dictated by the academic calendar. This study presented the possibility of using Moore's theory in a more limited scope. This may allow for future scholars to use a similar approach to digitally mediated learning opportunities that do not fit in the traditional academic class framework.

### **Delimitations**

As with all research, the present study had some initial delimitations. The first dealt with sample. This content analysis only sought to examine two examples of CCEOs and for only one student affairs functional area, orientation. This limits the transferability of the findings. Other student affairs practices may have different levels of transactional distance or may have different tangible examples of Moore's tenets.

Another delimitation might be the manner in which these two orientation programs were selected. They were identified because of their inclusion in research and rankings. This may mean that these programs are specially situated to have increased support and increased scrutiny. Therefore, they may contain tangible examples of Moore's tenets due to the types of staff support available to them but unavailable to the typical student affairs educator endeavoring to educate their online students.

A third delimitation is the limited triangulation. In this study, the only mechanism used for triangulation was web content review. While every attempt was taken to provide a thorough audit trail of each step, lack of a secondary researcher to examine each piece of material

provided could limit the veracity of the study. Students who participated as learners and instructors who taught the modules were not part of the study.

Despite these delimitations, the study was worthwhile. There is a gap in the literature that fails to connect the education provided by student affairs educators online with distance learning theory. This study attempts to make that connection by showing the ways in which student affairs educators are currently adhering to distance education theory in their practice.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter One introduces the multiple issues surrounding the study and presents the purpose and significance of the study. In the second chapter, a review of the relevant literature is provided. Chapter Three describes the step-by-step process for the methodology of the study that includes the procedure used to collect and review the data. The fourth chapter describes the study results and the final chapter discusses the implications of those results on future practice and research.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The first area of research presented in this review examines Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. There is no current research that can be found linking transactional distance with any facet of student affairs. To lay this foundation, literature broadly describing the usefulness of Moore's Transactional Theory in examining learning in distance education is presented. Since this study concentrates on the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy, I will present literature that focuses on these individual tenets. Finally, I discuss the interplay between components of the theory.

The second area of studies and reports are those whose authors outline current technology use in student affairs. Current researchers identify programmatic support and education, transactional support, and social media as the three categories of practice used by student affairs educators for online interaction with students. Because this study focuses on online programmatic support and education, the limited literature available in this area is presented. Literature is also discussed briefly for the other two categories to provide context.

Finally, because this study applies an instructional design theory to a student affairs practice it is important to present current literature surrounding the intersection between the learning paradigm and student affairs practice in an effort to differentiate this study from those which use student development theory to examine student affairs practice. First, this includes the descriptive analysis of the concept of learning outside of the classroom. Second, literature outlining the creation of curriculum in student affairs for in-person and online students will be presented.

#### **Moore's Transactional Distance Theory**

There are many theories that attempt to explain the impact on student learning of the distance learning experience (Gokool-Ramdoe, 2008). Moore's Transactional Distance Theory stands alone as one of the best explanations of the impact of mediating a student's learning through the use of technology. As distance education has shifted with the advancements in technology, so has the theory (Dron, 2005; Garrison, 2000; Giossos et al., 2009; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005).

Authors first sought to describe the general theory of transactional distance as more than a tautology, in this case a convoluted theory which merely stated the logical impact of increasing dialogue between two people, and frame its usefulness within the landscape of modern technology through definition creation. Gorsky and Caspy (2005) correctly pointed out that early research did not adhere to high levels of rigor. Therefore, the findings in these studies, which supported Moore's theory, were called into question. Subsequent researchers attempted to describe the impact of the three tenets of Moore's theory, dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy using more rigorous methodological approaches. In some cases the researchers focused on the impact of one tenet. In a recent study, however, the three tenets along with transactional distance as a conceptual tenet are all examined in relation to each other (Huang et al., 2015a, b). Huang et al. (2015a) conducted a study in which they presented a statistically significant instrument for the measurement of transactional distance. It is important to note that transactional distance as an independent variable has only recently been seen in research as an isolated tenet of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. Traditionally, scholars either treated transactional distance as a dependent variable or used "transactional distance" as an umbrella term that attempted to frame this theory within the larger construct of theories that used the concept of transactional distance as their foundation.

### **Transactional Distance**

The theory of transactional distance was derived from Dewey and Bentley's theories of educational transaction (Aluko et al., 2011; Chen, 2001a; Kassandrinou et al., 2014; Moore & Kearsley, 1995). Moore took their concept of generalized transactional distance in the learning process and applied it to distance education. At the time of its initial design, Transactional Distance Theory applied, primarily, to correspondence courses (Mbwesa, 2014). Moore posited that with these courses the physical distance was not the most influential factor for learning (Mbwesa, 2014). Rather, Moore proposed a theory that focused on the psychological divide between student and instructor inherent in all pedagogical practice but exacerbated by the time lag distance education presented (Kassandrinou et al., 2014). According to Huang et al. (2015a), "in Moore's original model, the extent of the transactional distance is determined mainly by three factors: (1) dialogue between the instructor and the learner, (2) the rigidity or flexibility of course structure, i.e. course design elements such as course objectives, instructional strategies and evaluation methods, and (3) learner autonomy that is

associated with learner directedness, indicating the amount of control that the learner exerts during the learning process (p. 106).

In addition, Moore postulated a correlative interplay between structure and dialogue. Namely, that as dialogue increased during the course, structure would need to decrease for students to feel as if their input could have impact on the direction of their learning and, therefore, decrease the transactional distance between the student and the instructor (Kassandrinou et al., 2014).

However, before researchers could begin to examine the relationships between the three tenets, the ever-expanding modalities for providing distance education required scholars to continually outline better operational definitions than Moore had provided in his initial theory (Dron, 2005; Garrison, 2000; Giossos et al., 2009; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Dron (2005) was so concerned about what he perceived to be “fuzzy and constantly evolving definitions used for structure and dialogue” (pp. 322-323), that he attempted to make an argument for the definition of dialogue to be metaphorically aligned with the concept of stigmergy, the term used “to describe the processes that lead to the formation of termite mounds” (p. 326). He argued that dialogue between users has impact on the structure of the course that in turn has added impact on the student, a cyclical process characteristic of termite colony coordination. This analogy highlights the lengths scholars have gone to focus attention on the need for comprehensive tenet definitions. Yet, this becomes increasingly difficult as the definitions for each tenet continue to be re-evaluated as current technology available to distance educators grows.

With definition ambiguity, it is not surprising that challenges to Moore’s theory, through the citation of imperfect study designs, are present in research. The greatest skepticism for the theory was presented in *A Critical Analysis of Transactional Distance* (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005) as a response to early researchers conducting studies perceived to be lacking either construct validity or supporting the theory at all. Their belief was that Moore’s theory was more of a tautology rather than a multifaceted theory (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Researchers in more recent studies have acknowledged these critiques but they have validated the theory with higher levels of construct validity using modern definitions that continue to evolve the understanding of Moore’s three tenets of Transactional Distance Theory (Huang et al., 2015a; 2015b). Therefore, Gorsky and Caspi’s (2005) critique does not carry the same weight it did a decade ago.

As recent as 2015, Huang et al. (2015a) stated,

While there is no doubt about the pedagogical importance of the theory and its impact on distance education, the value of the theory could be maximized with solid operational definitions of the underlying constructs that enable and enhance the application through empirical verifications of the theory (p. 107).

Gorsky and Caspi's (2005) findings highlighted the need for clear definitions, even as the changes in technology require those definitions to evolve. It is, therefore, important to examine the changes that have occurred in the literature for each individual tenet definition and whether an agreed upon definition is currently present in research. The dialogue tenet is at the heart of Gorsky and Caspi's (2005) critiques and also one of the most evolving definitions for Moore's theory.

### **Dialogue**

The definition of dialogue for transactional distance began as Moore's simple explanation of the ability of the instructor and the learner to communicate with each other (Shearer, 2010). Later Moore (1993) expanded the definition to include interactions between learners. He stated in *Theory of Transactional Distance* (1993),

Dialogue is developed by teachers and learners in the course of the interactions that occur when one gives instruction and the others respond. [...] A dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party. Each party in a dialogue is a respectful and [an] active listener; each a contributor, and [each] builds on the contributions of the other party or parties (p. 23).

However, subsequent research by Moore and others has expanded the definition of dialogue to include the following interplay: student-institution (Shin, 2002), student-content (Hillman et al., 1994; Rourke et al., 1999; Zimmermann, 2012), student-interface, teacher-teacher, teacher-content, content-content and student-student (Anderson, 2003; Boyle et. al., 2010; Chen, 2001b; Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014).

Researchers have found that digital media, media presented uni-directionally such as video recordings and self-study materials, increases the transactional distance between the learner and the instructor. However, interactive media such as chat boards, email, real-time video, and other Web 2.0 technologies decrease the transactional distance by increasing the interaction between the students, the material, and the instructor causing the student to feel a connection to the learning community (Anderson, 2003; Calhoun & Green, 2015; Santovec,

2004). The current definitions used by authors are, foundationally, Moore's traditional definitions. They also include an overlay of the updated interplay relationships and acknowledge, even without focusing on it, the expanding dialogue facilitation technologies. Definitional evolution is not only present for the dialogue tenet. The structure tenet has had similar amorphous stages throughout the history of Transactional Distance Theory scholarship.

### **Structure**

The structure tenet of transactional distance reflects the purposeful elements that make up the learning environment. Moore (1980) defines "structure [as] the extent to which the objectives, implementation procedures, and evaluation procedures of a teaching program are prepared, or can be adapted, to meet specific objectives, implementation plans, and evaluation methods of individual students" (p. 21). As with the other aspects of the theory, there is a wide range of definitions pertaining to what parts of the theory impact transactional distance for students. Some researchers defined structure through the analysis of student satisfaction with the perceived knowledge gained (Stein et al., 2005) while others tracked student satisfaction of course setup (Mbwesa, 2014). Chen and Willits (1999) used this definition of structure, stating "structure refers to the extent of rigidity or flexibility in the course organization and the implementation of videoconferencing" (p. 48). Their factor analysis suggests that the structural aspect of the theory "contained the dimensions of course organization and course delivery" (Chen & Willits, 1999, p. 45).

One of the primary issues with creating a definition for structure lies in Moore's presentation of structure as needing to be loose, allowing for the student to engage in the co-creation of knowledge based on their interactions with material sent to them. Yet, just as with the dialogue tenet definition, structure has been broken apart because the evolution of technology allows for multiple types of interactions within the course. Learner-content and learner-interface (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009) were two concepts for structure that provided the basis of a recent study by Huang et al. (2015a) which "suggest that [their] instrument, in general, shows promise as a valid and reliable measure of the constructs related to transactional distance theory" (p. 106). In particular, they present the learner-content structural component as a clearly defined formal component. They explain that the formal components do not, necessarily, result in rigid structure. Instead, they show how individualization and variety result in low levels of structure. They define individualization as "how the course is structured by considering student



background experience and attending to individual learning needs, such as pace, sequence, feedback and the manner in which content is organized” (Huang et al., 2015a, p. 110). These same concepts have also been seen in many case studies that sought to examine the structure tenet (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Kearsley & Lynch, 1996; Wikeley & Muschamps, 2004).

Usability, visualization, functionality, media use, and cognitive load were used by Huang et al. (2015a) to frame the concept of learner-interface. These concepts are enhanced by Web 2.0 elements that have been found by studies (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Huang et al., 2015b) to decrease transactional distance due to the advancements in interactive technology. These elements include technology that is aesthetically pleasing, has a useful interface, and an information delivery system that is easy to use and understand (Huang et al., 2015a). This current research enhances the comprehensive understanding of the structure tenet that began as Moore’s reflections on courses provided through the Postal Service.

### **Learner Autonomy**

The remaining tenet in Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory is learner autonomy and represents the only variable that has had little definitional transition across time. Many scholars have made reference to the difference in self-direction between traditional and non-traditional students, the latter of which are the primary demographic for higher education institutions’ distance education offerings. However, instructors cannot drive internal motivation, no matter the type of student (Aluko et al., 2011; Chen & Willits, 1999; Zejun & Peng, 2010). This fact sets apart Moore’s tenet of learner autonomy from dialogue or structure, which are components controlled by the instructor. Moore first defined an autonomous learner as “emotionally independent when pursuing a learning task, motivated primarily by his [sic] need for self-approval. He [sic] is also likely to have a high degree of instrumental independence, since he [sic] is experienced in coping with learning problems in a self-reliant manner” (Moore, 1980, p. 24). The difficulty in finding a method for explaining this tenet of transactional distance within the context of distance learning has resulted in few studies that focus on its measure (Chen & Willits, 1998; Huang et al., 2015a; Macaskill & Taylor, 2010).

Macaskill and Taylor (2010) attempted to “develop a brief, psychometrically sound, measure of autonomous learning” (p. 351). They attempted to build upon the Learning Readiness Scale, developed by Guglielmino (1977), by independently reflecting on the literature

in the field (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). They empirically tested a 12-item Likert scale through two studies. According to Huang (2015a), the results “indicated that learner autonomy consists of two factors: independence of learning (e.g. ‘I am happy working on my own’) and study habits (e.g. ‘I plan my time for study effectively’)” (p. 111). Huang et al. (2015a, 2015b), in one of the most recent studies to affirm Moore’s theory, then adapted Macaskill and Taylor’s (2010) scale to both create an instrument to measure the presence of the transactional distance tenets as well as examine the relationships between those tenets.

### **Interactivity Between Transactional Distance Tenets**

A core component of Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory is the interplay between the three tenets of dialogue, structure and learner autonomy. Moore (1989, 1993) described the tenets as being on a continuum rather than simply being present or not. As each tenet increased or decreased the transactional distance between the instructor and the student would grow or shrink. Most of the impact for transactional distance falls on the interplay between dialogue and structure. While this is the central point of the criticism about the theory, in particular from Gorsky & Caspi (2005), much of the research acknowledges that this concept is important to understand to create a distance education environment that has the greatest impact on student learning in distance education.

Moore’s initial argument was that when dialogue and structure are both low (-D-S) then transactional distance is at its greatest (Huang et al., 2015b; Moore, 1989, 1993; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Moore also postulated that there is low transactional distance when dialogue is high and if structure is low or high. So in both cases, +D+S (Moore, 1989) and +D-S (Moore, 1993), the goal of achieving low transactional distance is met. Gorsky & Caspi (2005) argued that this interplay, where the only change in variables was the increase or decrease of structure, showed Moore’s theory to be a tautology rather than a theory.

Subsequent to their argument, recent researchers have sought to verify a statistically significant impact of both dialogue and structure on the theory. In addition they have included the often-dismissed tenet of learner autonomy in their models (Huang et al., 2015a). Through a set of six case studies, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) illustrated that when high transactional distance may be inherent to the educational environment, student learning is best achieved through high levels of dialogue and high levels of structure which are shown to lower that distance. Recently, Huang et al. (2015a, 2015b) sought to “verify the theory by

operationalizing and examining the relationships of (1) dialogue, structure and learner autonomy to transactional distance, and (2) environmental factors and learner demographic factors to transactional distance in web-based courses” (Huang et al., 2015b, p. 1). The results of their study of 200 student responses “supported Moore’s TD theory and confirmed that TD is a function of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy” and that great strides have been taken to verify the interaction between Moore’s tenets (Huang et al., 2015b, p.10). Of particular note, Huang et al. (2015b) affirmed that rich and interactive instructional digital materials enhance student learning as Moore had asserted. They (Huang et al., 2015a; Huang et al., 2015b) are the first to provide statistical verification of such a relationship. They state:

An inverse relationship between high dialogue, high structure and high learner autonomy and low perceived TD, which was consistent with the findings that +D+S leads to the least TD while –D-S leads to the most amount of the four possible forms of dialogue and structure combination, with –D+S and +D-S in between. These findings supported one stream of previous research that high dialogue and high structure was effective in lessening TD (Kanuka et al., 2002; Moore, 1998; Stein et al, 2005; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2005) and that structure and dialogue were not necessarily in an inverse relationships as found by some other researchers (Saba & Shearer, 1994). The findings also supported an inverse relationship between learner autonomy and TD, which was consistent with Moore’s assertion that more autonomous learners would be more comfortable with higher TD. (Huang et al., 2015b, p. 12)

Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory has gone through several changes due to the changing technology for distance education and researcher’s search for strict definitions. Yet, recent research by Huang et al. (2015a, 2015b) supports that the theory is more than a tautology and more than a useful guide. It is a theory that identifies the pieces that if placed correctly, increase the probability for high levels of student learning in distance education.

### **Technology Use in Student Affairs**

As technology became a ubiquitous aspect of student interaction within student affairs in the 1990s and early 2000s much of the research focused primarily on projecting the impact for the future and identifying the technologies that could have implications on student affairs practice (Kleinglass, 2005; Kruger, 2005; Upcraft, Terenzini, & Kruger, 1999; Love & Estanek, 2004). Kevin Kruger (2005) in his Editor’s Note stated “the early to mid-1990s were spent

focusing on how to begin using e-mail to serve our communication needs” (p. 1). Yet, advances in technology have been so rapid that as soon as researchers identified the possibilities of a new application, it seemed to become defunct. Just a decade ago, Coleman et al. (2006) extolled the virtues of interacting with students via MySpace and “the” Facebook. MySpace is no longer a primary webpage for users of social media. Even as recently as 2015, Cabellon and Junco (2015) cited Twitter as a high impact practice that could engage “students online through social networks” (p. 52). Yet, an article in Reuters dated July 27, 2016 titled *Disappointing Earnings Revive Speculation on Twitters’ Future* gives pause to student affairs educators who do not know if the platform they choose to work with today will be available tomorrow (Abutaleb, 2016).

Many researchers during the past 20 years have identified another hesitance by student affairs professionals as being the move away from concepts of face-to-face relationship building and “high touch.” They identify this as the most likely side effect of including technology in student affairs practice (Barratt, 2000; Coleman et al., 2006; Kleinglass, 2005). Barrett (2000) states,

With all of the talk in years past about high tech and high touch student affairs has maintained the high touch but has resisted the high tech. In student affairs, we like to see the color of students eyes, and somehow using technology to mediate communication is not right (p. 1).

This apprehension does not diminish the inevitable impact technology has had on students affairs. The troubling finding, however, is that with nearly a quarter of all college students enrolling in online education (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Ginder & Stearns, 2014), a paradigm shift has been slow (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). Researchers in student affairs identify connection as one of the most important ways administrators can affect retention and graduation rates (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), but updated theories that reference the difference or similarity between connection with student affairs professionals in person versus digitally is not present in current research.

Coleman et al. (2006) states “it is important that student professionals seriously consider the implications and issues associated with implementing any new technological innovations, but at the same time cannot be fearful of this technology” (p. 225). Student affairs administrators seem to have taken the second part of this statement to heart. They have not been fearful of moving forward with placing components of their programs online even if they do so with

limited knowledge. Therefore, the current literature is descriptive in nature, having little to do with the study of learning outcomes or student impact. These descriptive analyses are broken apart into three areas of digitally mediated program implementation and interaction with students. The first are examples of online programmatic support and education. The second is literature describing the use of technology to provide traditional transactions online. The third is the use of social media to engage and create relationships with students.

### **Programmatic Support and Education**

Many authors present descriptive narratives about the services they provide to students online as primary examples of the intersection between student affairs and technology (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Kleinglass, 2005; Venable, 2010; Zeller, 2008). They denote a plethora of departments that typically fall under the student affairs moniker providing their programs online including orientation (Britto & Rush, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013), advising services (Britto & Rush, 2013; Buchanan, 2000; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005), career services (Buchanan, 2000; Moneta, 2005; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010), and tutorial assistance (Buchanan, 2000; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Smith, 2001). Some authors describe departments which simply provide informational materials to students digitally that would have traditionally been offered to them in-person (Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010), while others describe programs built online with a hybrid approach that includes analogue components (Fontaine & Cook, 2014; Venable, 2010; Zeller, 2008) for students at a distance. Lombard and Ditton (1997) posit that, “most design decisions concerning all of these technologies are made by trial and error, lore, and ‘seat of the pants’ exploration” (para. 2). Although most authors merely showed a basic understanding that in-person students and distance students receive their information in different manners, some acknowledged tangible differences between the types of student learning that takes place online versus in person. However, they failed to move beyond a description of the programs that have been developed for online student support with some changes based upon the special circumstances of the students (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Smith, 2005).

### **Online Transactions**

The 1980s and 1990s saw computer technology become a primary component of the administrative functions of higher education (Bowen, 2013; Kretovics, 2003; Kruger, 2005;

Moneta, 1997). Researchers first tracked or presented examples of transactional processes such as application submission, bill payments, and course registration, which had been transitioned from physical mail or in person interaction to one mediated by technology (Dare, 2005; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Moneta, 1997; Kretovics, 2003; Kleinglass, 2005; Smith, 2001). Not all of these transactional transitions were acknowledged as progressive. As recently as 2009, Steele and Thurmond (2009) advocated that, even with all the technology available, telephone was still “the most effective means of carrying on a dialogue that can produce a higher-order exchange between advisor and student” (p. 94). Ryan (2004) echoed this feeling that analog interactions were needed to supplement modern technological transactions. The transition of student service online is happening slowly (Barr, McClennen, & Sandeen, 2014; Rumble, 2000; Smith, 2005) and some researchers question whether student affairs educators are still hindering the technological advancement based upon the myth of in-person interaction being the most important of relationship building mechanisms (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Calhoun & Green, 2015; Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007).

### **Social Media**

Currently, many researchers are linking student affairs practice to the digital world as a result of advances in Web 2.0 technology (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Calhoun & Green, 2015). Social media, wiki’s, and other interactive digital platforms align with the student affairs practitioner’s commitment to connection (Cabellan & Junco, 2015; Hagler, 2011; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008). In Cabellon and Junco’s (2015) recent chapter entitled *The Digital Age of Student Affairs*, the focus is almost entirely on social media and the impact it can have on community building in higher education. In addition, Junco (2014) has also authored one of the first books devoted to social media and student affairs entitled *Engaging Students Through Social Media*. While he never mentions transactional distance, he does present examples of social media that can both enhance student development through community buildings as well as impact formal student learning (Junco, 2014). In addition, Junco outlines reasons for the implementation of social media in some but not all student affairs practices and the areas for research that are needed to advance this field (Junco, 2014). Many scholars have advocated for more distance education research and theory development in student affairs (Blimling & Whitt, 1999; Bowman & Cuyjet, 1999; Engstrom, 1997; Kretovics, 2002; Moneta, 2005; Renn & Zeligman, 2005; Rumble, 2000).

## Student Affairs and Student Learning

Student development has been acknowledged as a primary theoretical frame for student affairs practice for more than 40 years (Long, 2012). In the past 20 years the learning paradigm has been introduced and grown into an additional frame with significant value for many aspects of the field (Hamrick & Klein, 2015). It is, therefore, important to briefly describe the learning paradigm in student affairs in an effort to properly frame this study and the programs described in it as learning focused rather than student development focused.

In *Trends and Milestones Affecting Student Affairs Practice*, Hamrick and Klein (2015) state “in the past 20 years, student learning and development has shifted to the forefront of student affairs practice, with the very definition of student learning being called into question” (p. 17). Recently authors have attempted to present programs and research in which they focused on an educational paradigm in student affairs while maintaining their roots in documents such as ACPA’s *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs* (1996), NASPA’s *Greater Expectations* (2002) and *Good Practice in Student Affairs* (1997). These are foundational documents in which the author’s purpose was to “stimulate discussion and debate on how student affairs professionals can intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning and personal development” (Calhoun, 1996, para. 4). The idea became more than a conversation starter in the early 2000s with the publication of *Learning Reconsidered* (2004) and *Learning Reconsidered 2* (2006). Keeling (2006) called for educators “to show how their curriculum, courses, or experiential learning activities will promote specific learning outcomes” (p. 2).

This idea has been implemented, to a greater or lesser degree of success, in some areas of student affairs (Hamrick & Klein, 2015). Residential life is one functional area in which student affairs educators have seen some success incorporating a learning paradigm. In their article *Beyond Seat Time and Student Satisfaction: A Curricular Approach to Residential Education*, Kerr and Tweedy (2006) outline a sophisticated curricular approach to residential education. Gone are the isolated programmatic mindsets and in their place is a curricular approach that reflects the academic setting in which a student affairs educator’s work resides. In addition, as part of the findings of “an in-depth examination of 20 four-year colleges and universities that had higher-than-predicted graduation rates” (Whitt, 2006, p. 3), Whitt identified a “focus on student learning” as the primary factor for success. She highlighted student affairs functional areas at

Miami University and the University of the South in which staff members focus their attention on intellectual growth as the connection to the fundamental mission of their universities (Whitt, 2006).

Few researchers have attempted to examine curricular learning outcomes in student affairs programs. The focus on learning outcomes in distance education for student affairs programs is even scarcer. There is no current research that could be found connecting learning outcomes or a learning paradigm to online student affairs educational programs. There are, however, researchers who identify community development and student development outcomes from the use of certain technologies such as Twitter or Facebook (Cabellon & Junco, 2015; Shier, 2005).

The intersection of learning theory and distance education in student affairs is an unexamined area of research in student affairs. Blanchard and Cooks (2012) warn best; “technologies fail when developers assume that the technology is inherently of value and will be used because it can potentially serve some useful purpose” (p. 93). Researchers state that learning design and pedagogical choices are the most significant factors in the creation of community (Green & Denton, 2012; Liu et al., 2007). This study filled this gap in research.

In summary, distance education researchers have reconsidered the definitions for Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory tenets as technology has evolved (Anderson, 2003; Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Boyle et. al., 2010; Dron, 2005; Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Garrison, 2000; Giossos et al., 2009; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005; Hillman et al., 1994; Huang et al., 2015a; Rourke et al., 1999; Shin, 2002; Zimmermann, 2012). While early research has been subject to skepticism about its validity (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005), recent research has attempted to validate past research in general and Moore’s theory of transactional distance specifically (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Boyle et. al., 2010; Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Giossos et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2015a; Zimmermann, 2012). One set of researchers asserts that they have developed a valid instrument to examine dialogue, structure, learner autonomy, and generalized transactional distance (Huang et al., 2015a, 2015b).

Student affairs has been slow to advance theory and practice as it relates to working with students at a distance (Cabellon and Junco, 2015; Dare et al., 2005; Dungy & Gordon, 2011; Kretovics, 2003; McClellan & Stringer, 2009; Renn and Zeligman, 2005; Rumble, 2000; Tull & Kuk, 2012). The initial set of studies were ones in which scholars described or projected the



influence of technology on student affairs (Coleman et al., 2005; Kleinglass, 2005; Kruger, 2005; Love & Estanek, 2004; Moneta, 2005; Shier, 2005; Rourke and Brooks, 1967; Upcraft, Terenzini, & Kruger, 1999). In the next set of research, authors described the analog to digital change for some student transactions in student support services (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Dare, 2005; Kleinglass, 2005; Kretovics, 2003; Moneta, 1997; Ryan, 2004; Smith, 2001; Thurmond, 2009). Authors have also presented the programs that were, to a greater or lesser degree, implemented online (Britto & Rush, 2013; Buchanan, 2000; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Fontaine & Cook, 2014; Kleinglass, 2005; Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010; Zeller, 2008). Much of the current research from scholars about student affairs and technology describes the impact of social media and Web 2.0 technology on community building (Anderson, 2003; Cabellan & Junco, 2015; Calhoun & Green, 2015; Hagler, 2011; Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Santovec, 2004).

Finally, few researchers have focused on identifying the use of a learning paradigm in student affairs online practice. There are those who attempt to link the educational work done by student affairs educators with the academic purpose of the university (Calhoun, 1996; Kleinglass, 2005; Hamrick and Klein, 2015; Moneta, 1997). However, only a small subset of scholars showed how this idea is put into practice (Hamrick & Klein, 2015; Kerr and Tweedy, 2006; Whitt, 2006). There is a dearth of research in which authors attempt to connect a theory-based pedagogical approach to the development of online co-curricular educational opportunities. I will seek to fill this gap in the literature by examining the ways two online orientation programs tangibly adhere to Moore's tenets of transactional distance.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This study was designed to explore the ways in which selected online co-curricular educational opportunities (CCeOs) created for student affairs departments adhere to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. In addition, a secondary purpose was to identify the tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory in online CCeOs that could inform an operationalized definition for student affairs CCeOs and, ultimately, enhance learning efficacy for these online educational programs, which is the purpose of an instructional design theory. I purposefully chose two online CCeOs from similar departments but different types of higher education institutions to better understand how their online programs describe opportunities for dialogue, create structure, and acknowledge the level of individual learner autonomy needed for learning to occur.

The following five research questions guided this investigation:

3. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory?
  - a. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue?
  - b. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure?
  - c. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments take into account Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy?
4. What tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, present in two online Orientation Programs, can inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs online CCeOs?

In this chapter, I will describe the overall design for the study. I first explain the methodology for the study and sample selection. I then describe the data collection matrices used in this study and the manner in which the data was collected and analyzed.

I then describe my positionality as a researcher. Finally, I present the ways in which trustworthiness and authenticity were enhanced.

### **Methodological Overview**

A content analysis was purposefully chosen as the method for this study. Content analysis began as a quantitative method in which researchers would examine the word count in text analysis, primarily as a way to analyze news articles (Mayring, 2014). Modern definitions of content analysis include qualitative approaches (Kohlbacher 2006; Mayring, 2014). Mayring (2000) identifies a content analysis as “an approach of empirical methodological [sic] controlled analysis of texts within their context of communication, following content analysis rules and step-by-step models, without rash quantification” (p. 5). Current researchers in the field of content analysis have also expanded the applicability of the method to include various types of materials that can be included in a content analysis such as video and pictures (Mayring, 2014). Additionally, Kohlbacher (2006) states that “not only the manifest content of material is analyzed, but also so-called latent content as well as formal aspects of the material” (p. 10). For this study, in which two online orientation programs are examined, content analysis provides a robust method for examining every type of content present in these programs.

One of the quality aspects of qualitative content analysis is adherence to procedure (Mayring, 2014). Mayring (2014) provides a general procedure model. Included below are the steps provided by Mayring (2014) as well as the steps taken in this study to adhere to the quality steps of a content analysis:

- Definition of the material – The primary and secondary orientation pages as well as the orientation modules at two institutions are identified as the material for this study.
- Analysis of the situation of origin – Analysis of the orientation programs is identified for this study.
- Formal characteristics of the material – A rich, thick descriptions is provided for this study.
- Direction of the analysis – The direction of analysis is to use the orientation program material to ascertain the extent to which the programs adhere to the tenets of Moore’s Transactional Distance theory.

- Theoretical differentiation of sub-components of the problem – Moore’s Transactional Distance theory provides the sub-components of the problem; Dialogue, Structure, and Learner Autonomy.
- Determination of techniques of analysis and establishment of a concrete procedural model – A complete description of the analysis technique is provided below.
- Definition of content analytical units – Codes were deconstructed from the statements used in research done by Huang et al. (2015a).
- Analytical steps taken by means of the category system: Summary/Inductive category formation; explication/context analysis; structuring deductive; mixed – An explicative, broad contextual analysis was conducted.
- Re-checking the category system by applying it to theory and material – The category system is based upon research done by Huang et al. (2015a), which, in turn, is based upon Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory.
- Interpretation of the results in relation to the main problem and issue – All interpretations are tied back to the connection between the orientation program components and Moore’s Transactional Distance theory.
- Application of content-analytical quality criteria – All efforts were taken to adhere to the guidelines for quality provided by Mayring (2014) and Kolbacher (2006).

Each of these steps was considered in creating the research methodology for this study.

Traditionally, researchers have used Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory to examine online courses (Huang et al, 2015a; 2015b). They approached the research with an operationalized understanding of the components of the course that would align with Moore’s three tenets (Huang et al, 2015a; 2015b). In the case of this study, there is no such operationalized understating for Moore’s theory when considering online CCEOs. Therefore, unlike academic courses, there are no descriptions present in research which provide examples that can guide researchers in their examination of the adherence to a distance learning theory for purposes of analyzing increased learning in student affairs online CCEOs. Performed in a systematic way, a content analysis focuses the research on specific pieces of material using theory to guide the analysis (Mayring, 2014). In this study, Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory is the guiding theory. In this way, a qualitative content analysis can answer the first four questions of this study, by identifying the ways in which Moore’s tenets are found in CCEOs,

while also answering the fifth question. In addition, rather than merely reporting the number of examples of Moore's tenets, a rich, thick description will enhance the efficacy of this study.

### **Sample Selection**

In a qualitative content analysis, purposeful examples are identified that would provide an opportunity to examine the questions posed in this study (Creswell, 2008; Mayring, 2014). With the current evolution of technology and the ever-expanding offerings of online education, it was important to identify programs that were both current and comprehensive enough to be included in this study. Two programs were identified.

Many university departments provide online programs for students. As previously mentioned, these examples include multi-unit online student orientations (Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Smith, 2001), student leadership education (Brindley, 2014; Kane, 2010), digital educational modules for career services (Dahl, 2005; Santovec, 2004; Smith, 2001; Smith, 2005; Venable, 2010), online psychological self-assessments and coping skills (Brindley, 1995), and online library information literacy tutorials (Brindley, 2014; Brindley & Paul, 2004; George & Frank, 2004; Smith, 2001). During the search for samples to include in this study, many programs were initially excluded because they included limited material, provided singular pieces of educational material, or were purely for information dissemination. The two orientation programs chosen for this study included multiple types of educational mediums including presentations, web pages, videos, and quizzes.

The orientation program at Institution One was identified through multiple steps. First, the 2016 rankings for online public institutions in *U.S. News and World Report* were examined. Next, for each institution in the top 25 a web search was conducted with the institution search engine for publicly accessible online CCEOs in the program areas already described. Many programs were initially cut due the requirement of student credentials to gain access to the materials. In these cases it could not be determined to what level these programs could adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. For some of the programs for which access could be gained, the materials that were available were limited in scope. For example, the entirety of the program was comprised of one web page and/or a PowerPoint presentation. Finally, there were programs identified that included what the initial review found to be examples of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. The orientation program at Institution One seemed to contain the most content including an online orientation program, videos, multiple websites, and

text material. Many programs at peer institutions contained only two presentation modes, primarily text and video. I determined that the orientation materials at Institution One could contain enough detailed information to provide answers to the research questions contained in the study.

Institution One is an online campus of a public research institution that has been offering distance education since 1892. The online campus first opened in 1998. The current enrollment of the online campus is approximately 10,800 students. The online campus offers more than 125 accredited graduate degrees, undergraduate degrees, certificates, and minors. In addition, all of the 23 baccalaureate degrees and 5 associate degrees that can be earned completely online are no different than the ones earned at the physical campus. The institution has multiple student support offices that offer more than transactional support, including academic advising, career counseling, and financial aid. In addition, they serve students from all 50 states and more than 60 countries. Its student services focus on the online student experience and include new student orientation, academic advising and career counseling, research library, help desk, and tutorials (Institution website).

The second orientation program was chosen based upon three articles in the *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. In the first article researchers attempted to describe the efforts of different institutions to address quality assurance in online education (Crawley & Fetzner, 2013). The online campus of Institution Two is highlighted in the article for its development of an institutional quality assurance model. In the second article researchers provide examples from different institutions and programs of what they called best practices for providing services to students online (Britto, Ford, & Wise, 2013). They highlight the suite of services provided for students attending the online campus for Institutions Two. In the final article Britto & Rush (2013) detail the services provided by the Online Student Support Service unit at Institution Two. They provide a description for each of the programs. The orientation program is described as being developed with the Quality Matters rubric, a distance education quality assurance measure, as primary source content. The orientation web pages were accessible to the public and an initial review revealed many examples of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. The asynchronous online orientation module was protected through authentication. I was provided access to the asynchronous online orientation and found additional examples of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. The inclusion of

the orientation program in multiple journal articles related to distance education along with the use of the Quality Matters rubric in the creation of the orientation program was determined to be a rigorous identification method for the addition of the orientation at Institution Two in this study.

Institution Two is one of the fastest-growing community colleges in the United States and serves 98,000 students. The institution is focused on affordability and access and more than 66% of students at the institution identify as non-white. The largest percentage of race/ethnicity self-identification at the institution is Hispanic at 38% of the student body. It is recognized nationally as a Top 10 Associate Degree producer. The community college boasts six physical campus locations. As part of its multi-campus portfolio, the online campus serves students at a distance. It offers more than 70 degree, transfer, and training programs. The second institution's online component offers 26 programs that are available 100% online (Institution website).

In prior research, online orientation was listed as a prime example of student affairs education in a digital form (Brindley, 2014; Britto, Ford & Wise, 2013; Crawley & Fetzner, 2013; Kane, 2010; Smith, 2001). Inherent in the purpose of the online orientation is a learning paradigm best articulated in the iterated structure of the content and the educationally explicit material itself. Pedagogical theories such as Moore's Transactional Distance Theory enhance the quality of online education, in this case online orientation. While no descriptions were provided, the orientation designers for Institution Two acknowledged the link between quality and pedagogical theory by making reference to Quality Matters as a primary content source. Therefore, given that initial inspection of the orientation materials revealed examples of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance theory, along with the explicit link between the orientation program and Quality Matters at Institution Two, these orientation programs are already steeped in a philosophical construct tying quality to a pedagogical learning approach.

### **Data Collection Matrices**

For this study, Moore's Transactional Distance Theory was used to create an *a priori* set of criteria for the coding guidelines used in this research. In much of the research describing content analysis methodology, a key is the identification of criteria for interpreting the document materials before analyzing them (Kohlbacher 2006; Mayring 2014; Yin 2003). Because Moore's theory in distance education is so prevalent, many researchers have examined elements of Transactional Distance Theory (Ekwunife-Orakwue & Teng, 2014; Huang et al, 2015a; Huang et

al. 2015b). In these studies, researchers have developed assessment tools to guide the evaluation of two of the three tenets of Moore's theory. However, Huang et al. (2015a; 2015b) provided a current and comprehensive instrument of 103 statements, which composed a statistically reliable measure of the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory.

Using Huang et al.'s research (2015a; 2015b), coding guidelines were developed by deconstructing each statistically significant factor statement. These coding guidelines were documented as an *a priori* coding scheme for each tenet of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. For example, they found that learner-instructor interactions and learner-learner interactions explained a cumulative 61% of the variance in the dialogue component (Huang et al., 2015a). An example of these statements would be, "I communicate with my instructor on course-related issues at least once a week" (Huang et al., 2015a, p. 115). In this example the connotation of "recurring contact" was extracted as a criterion for interpreting the findings. This criterion was then noted in the dialogue data collection matrix (see Appendix A) as one to look for in the CCEO documents. Possible examples were provided for each set of codes in an effort to increase coding reliability. As an example, the code "recurring contact" could be used when the student was prompted to ask questions after each module or were given the identity, after each module, of a staff member who would contact them from the appropriate department. In addition, space was allowed for rich, thick descriptions of each tangible example of these codes found documented in the CCEO.

For Moore's tenet of structure there were two separate factors. The learner-content interaction was broken down into flexibility and formality, which accounted for 58% of the variance (Huang et al., 2015a). The second factor was the learner interface interaction that was broken down into knowledge of media use, choice of media use, visualization, functionality, and usability that had a cumulative variance of 71%. Similar statements were used as with the matrix for dialogue. The structure matrix used prompts such as "the course is structured in a way that enables me to work at my own pace to meet the course goals and objectives" (Huang et al., 2015a, p. 118). This statement was given the code "self-paced." Examples of the "self-paced" code would be when no time limit was present in the materials, the system allowed the student to exit the orientation and return, or the system allowed the student to save their progress.

The learner autonomy tenet was adapted by Huang et al. (2015a) from a study done by Macaskill and Taylor (2010). Huang et al. (2015a) were able to duplicate, for the most part, the



findings of the previous study done by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) by finding that two factors, independence of learning and study habits, explained a cumulative variance of 61%. This was the most difficult set of statements to glean tangible examples. As stated previously in this study, the student drives learner autonomy. Therefore, the statements attempted to ascertain the internal motivation of the student. Questions were ones such as, “I take responsibility for my learning experiences” (Huang et al., 2015a, p. 121). In these cases, the learner autonomy coding guideline (see Appendix C) identified “Acknowledgments of Learning Ownership” as the code to be used. Examples provided in the learner autonomy coding guideline were when the opening narrative of the orientation placed the onus on the student to achieve completion of the orientation program or when the video narrator talked about personal responsibility.

Huang et al. (2015a) included a scale for the variable of transactional distance. They found two factors, learner-instructor and learner-learner transactional distance, explained 64% of the variance. In many cases the statements for these factors could not be deconstructed for codes because the examples could not be tangibly found in the online orientation since the statements were about feelings the students had. Statements such as “I feel I have learned a great deal in this online course” present a limited scope for finding tangible examples in a CCeO.

Finally, in some cases statements included in the instrument developed by Huang et al. (2015a) resulted in the same description extraction. As a case in point, “I feel closely connected to my fellow students in this online course” and “I feel a strong sense of ‘being with’ my fellow students during my learning process” were both identified as “connection to peers component” as can be seen in the transactional distance data collection matrix (see Appendix D). Possible examples would be Facebook pages for orientation participants or peer mentors mentioned in the videos. A full coding guide is also included (see Appendix E).

### **Data Collection**

Orientation programs at two separate institutions were chosen for this study. For Institution One, some of the materials were available in a public domain while others were part of an online orientation program that required registration. Institution Two also included public materials as well as those behind a login screen. A dummy login and password was provided to the researcher by the institution. With no human subjects as part of this study, IRB approval was not requested.

I collected data by first opening the primary webpage for online new student orientation at Institution One. This page contained general orientation information as well as links to additional informational pages. All of these pages contained additional materials, videos, links, or a combination thereof. Some links were internal to the orientation domain while others were external links to other Institution One departmental or informational pages. Only materials on the orientation domain pages themselves or the orientation information pages that were linked from the orientation domain were reviewed for this study.

Once a page was opened, a copy of the page or screen shot was saved in the digital folder titled Institution One as Institution One \_(title of page).doc. Any videos imbedded in the page were transcribed. The transcription was also saved in the digital folder. It was saved with the same title as the webpage with “\_video(number)” added. This process was repeated for all pages in the orientation domain and any pages linked from the orientation domain. I then reviewed all pages for all the intangible components of the page such as functionality, usability, etc. I then wrote a reflection on my findings and saved the document in the appropriate folder with the title Institution One\_ Kriegerreview.doc.

For the online orientation for Institution Two, I followed a similar system to the one previously described. I first logged into the orientation system. For each page, I either saved the module as a document file in a folder called Institution Two as Institution Two \_(title of page).doc or as a screen shot with a similar document name. Because this was a set of modules outside of the primary domain, many of the links were outside the module domain. Therefore, only one level pages were reviewed, meaning only the pages that were directly linked from the module. All videos were transcribed and saved with a title similar to the module page with “\_video(number)” added. I then repeated each step for each page in the module and the pages linked from the module. I then reviewed all pages for the intangible components, wrote a reflection of my findings and saved the document as Institution Two\_Kriegerreview.doc.

### **Data Analysis**

To analyze my data, I continually referenced my research questions, the tenets of Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory and the instrument developed by Huang et al. (2015a). In a content analysis, a form of constant comparative method of analysis is used (Creswell, 2008), but the observations of the researcher are compared to the prototypes identified by the theory (Mayring, 2014).

There were two components to the materials that were important to study. The first was the tangible digital materials presented with which the student interacted. For each page of written materials I read it twice to gain a firm understanding of the materials being presented. For each video I watched the full video once and then read the transcription twice, again to gain a fuller understanding of the material. An *a priori* coding scheme was used as part of the data collection matrix development allowing for immediate review to begin (Stemler, 2001). I began to review the written or transcribed documents line-by-line and highlighted the words or phrases that aligned with the categories listed in each data collection matrix (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). As I reviewed, I cited any words or phrases that referenced components of the orientation program and were recurrent but failed to align with the *a priori* categorization construct (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). These were noted in a document title Miscellaneous.doc.

The second component important for study was the observations of the materials themselves. I reviewed each page visually and documented my visual findings in notes and memos. I then reviewed each note and memo line-by-line and highlighted each word of phrase that aligned with the categories listed in each matrix.

Once all pages for an institution had been reviewed I began to review all matrix pages together that were identified for a single component and examined them for emergent patterns through the use of axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Emergent patterns, noted when there were at least three examples of a theme present in the matrix review, were given theme denotations and the specific notations from the matrix along with my general notes were kept in a word document title by the theme denotation (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005).

The first four questions for this study reference Moore's tenets of transactional distance. Direct quotes from the pages themselves along with the transcripts of the video were used to illustrate examples of Moore's tenets. For example, notes such as "contact your advisor," "send an email," or "contact us" would be assigned to the thematic pattern Dialogue. They would then be placed in the sub-category learner-instructor. Another example would be "video present," "PowerPoint present," and "easy to navigate." I would identify these terms through examination of the page as a whole through notes and memos after review of the content in totality. I would assign these comments to the Structure thematic pattern.

To answer the final research question relating to the creation of an operationalized definition for student CCEOs I first read the rich thick descriptions of the components that were

present under each emergent pattern. These examples created the base for definitional development. In addition, for any deconstructed code present in the coding guideline that was not seen in either orientation program, the possible examples were used to supplement the definition. Examples which could inform a definition of student affairs online CCEOs emerged

During this process, I continually reviewed the thematic patterns with a faculty member familiar with my research and Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. After the review and analysis of the two sets of orientation materials, I was able to answer the research questions present in this study. In addition I was able to provide a thick and rich descriptive narrative about the orientation programs themselves and the ways in which they adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory.

### **Researcher Positionality**

I approached this research with experiences that influence how I interacted with this content area. It is important to acknowledge the personal, professional, and scholarly experiences that frame how this study was developed. While I do not believe my experiences influenced the authenticity or trustworthiness of this study, it is important to acknowledge the influence my background may have on research design, data collection, and data interpretation.

I believe that a curricular approach to learning, whether in or out of the classroom, enhances the education of students. Too often, student affairs practitioners see information dissemination as education. Examples that I have seen in practice are that administrators provide a singular program on the impact of alcohol and present that as the totality of alcohol education, or practitioners place a Powerpoint presentation online about how to dress for an interview without context or supplemental information and offer this as effective education for students about interview protocol. I know that in the field of instructional design, an intentional, well-planned, curricular approach enhances the learning of students. I have not seen a similar approach in a student affairs context. I approach this study with a practitioner lens as a primary part of my identity. I also approach this study with a hope that the findings herein will positively impact the practice of co-curricular online education.

I also believe that distance education is being used to positively impact access to higher education. More students are able to attend higher education institutions because access is not affected by distance when technology is leveraged to mitigate the issue. Leaders at both public and private institutions have increased the number of course offerings to students at a distance,

but few have provided co-curricular resources for students at a distance. Students are being given a deficient experience because they are not receiving the student support with the same intentionality as their peers at in-person institutions. As previously stated, faculty members and instructional design staff were early adopters of technology. Theories such as Moore's Transactional Distance Theory were used as foundational design documents. However, I do not believe a similar adoption in student affairs has taken hold. This has resulted in a dearth of research to help practitioners find the best ways to educate students online in a co-curricular construct.

I have attended many student affairs conferences in the past decade and have tried to attend presentations that would increase my knowledge around the area of student support to distance students. I have only been successful finding one such presentation. It is my belief that if there were practitioners using distance pedagogical theory or scholars researching this area of inquiry that presentations of practice or papers would be available. I believe the absence of these materials is consistent with the dearth of research available on this topic.

I have also taken distance courses. However, these courses were part of a graduate program at a primarily in-person research one institution. I have never been asked to participate in an online co-curricular educational opportunity. None of my colleagues has ever prompted a conversation about any of the online co-curricular educational opportunities they have created. This has reinforced my view that student affairs practitioners have little desire to infuse their online CCEOs with a theory informed pedagogical approach.

I have developed online co-curricular educational opportunities both professionally and as part of an academic course. Professionally, I have created online programs for students who live in residence halls. These have been short programs that were developed in a learning management system. I have also developed online co-curricular programs to serve as student conduct sanctions. Also, as part of an academic course, I generated a template for an online orientation program. I used Moore's Transactional Distance Theory to inform the program development.

My personal desire to influence student access to higher education led to my interest in distance education. My experience developing online programs for students at primarily in-person higher education institutions led to my desire to find the best way to provide support to students at a distance. Finally, my search to find academic resources to guide my production of

online co-curricular educational opportunities was unsuccessful. This study is a natural reflection of my personal, professional, and academic goal, which is to influence the learning of distance education students. While every effort has been taken to limit the impact my biases may have on this study, my experiences may influence the way the data was gathered and analyzed.

### **Authenticity and Trustworthiness**

Authenticity and trustworthiness in a qualitative study is important for evaluating the quality of the research (Creswell, 2003). Authenticity can be established by showing that what is being examined has relevance to the research questions (Creswell, 2008). Trustworthiness or credibility in qualitative research is used to describe the extent to which all pieces of the study are valid (Creswell, 2003). To enhance authenticity I used the primary method in qualitative content analysis of developing *a priori* categories. To increase trustworthiness I used three strategies: (a) creating an *a priori* coding scheme reviewed by an expert in the field; (b) providing rich, thick description; (c) providing an audit trail for peer debriefing.

To enhance authenticity, one method is to establish a set of protocols for analyzing the data (Stemler, 2001). Stemler (2001), wrote, “two fatal flaws that destroy the utility of a content analysis are faulty definitions of categories and non-mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories” (para. 30). This observation gets at the essence of authenticity as described by Creswell (2008). While definitions for Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory have changed across time, the current definitions presented by Huang et al. (2015a) that accompanies the instrument they developed for the theory lend weight to the *a priori* categorization. In addition to using a published instrument to inform the categorization, the categories were also reviewed by a scholar with expertise in distance education. These steps were used to enhance the authenticity of the study.

To advance trustworthiness, the protocol and coding scheme were created through the deconstruction of quantitative questions in research performed by Huang et al. (2015). An expert in distance education reviewed the coding scheme. A well-conceived coding scheme is, according to Hsiu-Fang and Shannon (2005), “central to trustworthiness in research using content analysis” (p. 1286). Further, Creswell (2003) explained that providing a thick, rich description can increase trustworthiness. Therefore, rich, thick descriptions were provided for both of the orientation programs as well as the examples of the tenets. The final measure I used

to increase trustworthiness was the use of an audit trail. An audit trail is a set of notes and memos used to document the decisions that were made during the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). These notes and memos were provided, as part of peer debriefing, to scholars familiar with my research in order to explain the decisions that were made during the study and document how, if at all, my positionality influenced my findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

In summary, this study was designed to both identify the ways in which selected co-curricular educational opportunities created for student affairs programs adhere to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory as well as provide tangible examples of Moore's theory that can inform an operationalized definition for student affairs CCEOs. The methodology of this study was sufficient to provide information which led to answers for each research question. The fourth chapter describes the study results and the final chapter discusses the usefulness of the findings, their applicability in the development of an operationalized definition of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory in student affairs as well as future research that could build upon this study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **FINDINGS**

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which selected online co-curricular educational opportunities (CCeOs) created for student affairs departments adhere to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. In addition, a secondary purpose was to identify the tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory in online CCeOs that could inform an operationalized definition for student affairs CCeOs and, ultimately, enhance learning efficacy for these online educational programs, which is the purpose of an instructional design theory.

The research questions guiding this study included:

5. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory?
  - a. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue?
  - b. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure?
  - c. To what extent do Orientation Programs created for student affairs departments take into account Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy?
6. What tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, present in two online Orientation Programs, can inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs online CCeOs?

Findings from this study were sufficient to answer the first four research questions and provided initial insights to inform the final research question. In this chapter I first provide a descriptive profile for the online orientation programs in this study. I focus the descriptions on the landing pages as templates, to provide context for the remainder of the findings. The remainder of the chapter focuses individually on each Transactional Distance Theory tenet, further delineated by the factors Huang et al. (2015a) outlined for



each tenet. For each component of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory I provide rich, thick descriptions of the examples of the deconstructed codes. The final question for this study was what tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory can inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs CCEOs? This chapter provides ample examples to inform an operationalized definition.

Chapter 5 of this study provides context for these examples and suggests future research that could build upon this study to create a fully formed definition or theory for online co-curricular pedagogy.

### **Online Orientation Program Descriptions**

Institution One served a large number of non-traditionally aged students, many of them military personnel. Institution Two was a community college that served traditionally aged students, many from underrepresented minority groups. Each institution had a designated online orientation-landing page. The following section provides a rich, thick description of the landing pages for each institution. The pages for each institution were built upon a template. The description of the landing pages provides context for the remainder of the findings.

As with academic courses, the content of the material may be developed or delivered by multiple instructors. The term *instructors* may reference the developers of the orientation programs who may or may not participate in other aspects of instruction, similar to a lead faculty member who develops a course for teaching assistants to administer. A second group of instructors were therefore identified as those who delivered the material during the orientation modules. A final cohort of instructors were those, similar to invited colleagues during an academic course, who were presented as information resources when needed by the student. A primary example used at both the orientation programs was the academic advisor.

#### **Institution One**

Institution One's landing page displayed "New Student Orientation" as the header. After a brief welcome paragraph, the student was instructed to "Sign up for an Orientation Webinar" by clicking on a hyperlink. The hyperlink redirected the student to a registration page. The student had orientation options from which to choose. By clicking the "Register" button, the student was given access to log in by entering their information in dialogue boxes or by using their Facebook or Google information (see Figure 1).

The next section highlighted the institution as “Serving our Military and Veteran Students.” This was the only population highlighted on this page. A brief paragraph advertised the ease of attending the campus while stationed around the world and was followed by a hyperlink to “Read more about services for students in the military or veterans” (see Figure 1).

A final section was headed “Undergraduate Orientation Guide.” The student was prompted to “Use this orientation guide to learn how to become a successful student and reach your academic goals.” The page included seven content hyperlinks to click on. These hyperlinked content pages were used as the primary content areas designated by the orientation instructor. The web pages linked from these content pages were identified for this study as secondary content areas. Only primary and secondary content areas were reviewed in this study (see Figure 1).

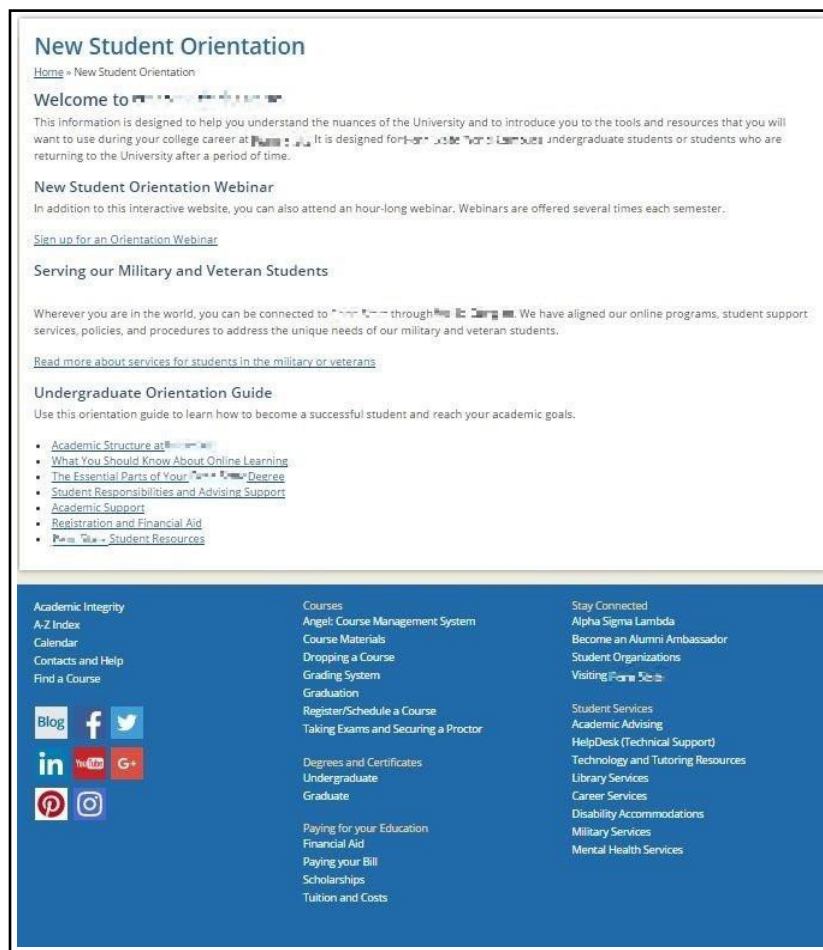


Figure 1. The new student orientation landing page for Institution One.

Each of the primary pages was built in a similar template. As shown in Figure 2, at the top of the pages were five tabs titled “A-Z Index,” “Calendar,” “Contacts & Help,” “Find a Course,” and “Log In.” Additionally, a search tab with a magnifying glass icon was present at the top of the template. The institution’s brand and the page title were located below the tabs. A set of hyperlinked boxes with the titles “Home,” “Courses,” “Degrees and Certificates,” “Paying for Your Education,” “Stay Connected,” and “Student Services” headed the top of the information presentation portion of the page. The “Undergraduate Orientation Guide” content area titled the white space of the page with the guide content areas hyperlinked as a list below the header. Each page then presented the information for the content topic in white space. At the bottom of the white space the Undergraduate Orientation Guide links were presented once again as a bookend to the page. The footer of the template contained links for the tabs that were at the top of the page as well as hyperlinked icons for the institution’s blog, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Google Plus, Pinterest, and Instagram accounts. There were also many links under the headers “Courses,” “Degrees and Certificates,” “Paying for your Education,” “Stay Connected,” and “Student Services.” Every page that was a part of the Undergraduate Orientation Guide used the same template. The only differentiation in the pages was the content material provided in the white space. The secondary content pages for Institution One that stayed within the same orientation domain were built in the same template. The secondary content pages that linked outside the orientation domain used different templates. In addition to all primary and secondary webpages, I reviewed the orientation webinar.



*Figure 2.* Template header for orientation pages at Institution One.

The orientation webinar was accessed by a link sent to the student’s email. The student clicked the link and a web browser opened. The orientation program was run on the Adobe Connect platform and allowed the student to type in a dialogue box when it was available. In the top left of the screen a dialogue box welcomed the student. At the bottom left was a list of links. The instructor controlled the main screen and had a static slide displayed. The presentation was

primarily unidirectional, wherein the instructor presented information to the student. In three instances, the instructor prompted the students to interact with a polling application. The instructor was then able to respond to the student's entries. In addition, the students were able to ask questions during the presentation. However, the chat box, and any correspondence through it, was not visible to other students during the presentation. At the end of the presentation, the instructor opened up the chat dialogue box for all students to see and prompted the students to ask questions. Students were given the option to ask the instructor questions as well as interact with their fellow students. After all answers were exhausted, the presentation was ended. Seventy-one individual orientation web pages and 47 orientation module slides, as well as the transcript for the orientation, for Institution One were examined as part of this study.

### **Institution Two**

The landing page for the online orientation at Institution Two displayed "New Student Online Orientation" as the header. The template included a top banner with the hyperlinked name of each of the satellite locations of the community college. The institution's emblem was displayed as the primary component of the banner along with a search dialogue box with a magnifying glass icon. Included in this main banner were hyperlinks for the institution's portal, "Email," "Contact Directory," and "A-Z Index." A small banner underneath the main banner includes a "Home" icon, "Programs of Study," "Admissions," "Student Services," "Paying for College," "Community & Business," and "Libraries" (see Figure 3). Underneath these template banners was white space in which the orientation information was presented on each page.



*Figure 3.* Template header for orientation pages at Institution Two.

The landing page began with a welcome paragraph that identified this orientation for "students planning to take ONLY online courses for the upcoming semester." Next were five steps for the online orientation process including the application, placement test, the orientation session, online readiness assessment, and online advising and registration. The next part of the

site was an online advising form that included dialogue boxes for the student to enter their information. On the left was a gray box with primary content area hyperlinks including “Admissions,” “Financial Aid,” “Bacterial Meningitis: What You Need to Know,” “Advising”, “Placement Testing”, “Transfer & Transcripts”, “Registration”, and “Books & Bookstore” (see Figure 4). The bottom of the template page included a “Take the next step” tool bar in which the student could click on dialogue hyperlinks to “Ask a Question,” “Request More Info,” and

New Student Online Orientation

WELCOME to [Institution Two] Online!

We are glad you have decided to take online courses with us. New Student Online Orientation sessions are for first time in college students planning to take ONLY online courses for the upcoming semester.

**New Student Online Orientation Process:**

1. Submit your [New Student Online College Application](#)
2. Take placement test or submit test scores; Visit our [Placement Testing site](#) for more information
3. Complete an Online Orientation session (your online advisor will provide you with proper access)
4. Complete [Online Readiness Assessment](#) (login using your [Institution Two] username and password)
5. Complete an Online Advising and Registration session with an online advisor

PLEASE NOTE: New Student Online Orientation is for first time in college, fully online students ONLY.

**Online Advising**

To request that an Online Advisor to contact you, please fill out the following request form:

Name\*  
 First Name  Last Name

Date of Birth\*  
 /  /

Student ID\*

Email\*

Phone\*

Best Time to Contact\*

Preferred Method of Contact\*  
 Email  Phone

**Advising Needs**

Registration  
 Enrollment  
 Drop/Withdrawal  
 Recs not met/ Error Message  
 Graduation  
 Academic Plan  
 Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)

Admission  
 Application  
 Transcripts  
 Testing Required  
 Residency Status  
 Returning Student  
 Meningsits  
 First Time Student

Holds  
 New Student Orientation (NSO)  
 Residency Status  
 State Authorization  
 Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP)

Comments

**Submit Form**

Figure 4. The new student orientation landing page for Institution Two.

“Apply to [Institution Two].” Included in the footer of the template were lists of hyperlinks for information under the headers “About [Institution Two],” “Resources,” “Campuses,” and “Policies”. There were also icon links for the social media applications Facebook, Twitter,

Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and Google Plus. Finally, there were links for “Campus Police,” the institution alert system, “Emergency Management,” “FAQs,” “Feedback,” “Help,” and hyperlinks to view pages in Spanish and Vietnamese (see Figure 5). The only differentiation between the orientation pages was the information in the white space. The secondary content pages were any pages that were linked from the content area pages linked in the gray box on the orientation landing page. All pages that were within the institution domain used the same template.

In addition to the orientation web pages, a link to a self-paced online orientation was sent to the student. The orientation was a mixture of static slides, some with audio narration and some without, narrated live action videos, and videos of narrated slide shows. The final step of the online orientation was a 10-question quiz with questions based on the orientation module material. Students were required to score an 80% or they were required to retake the quiz.

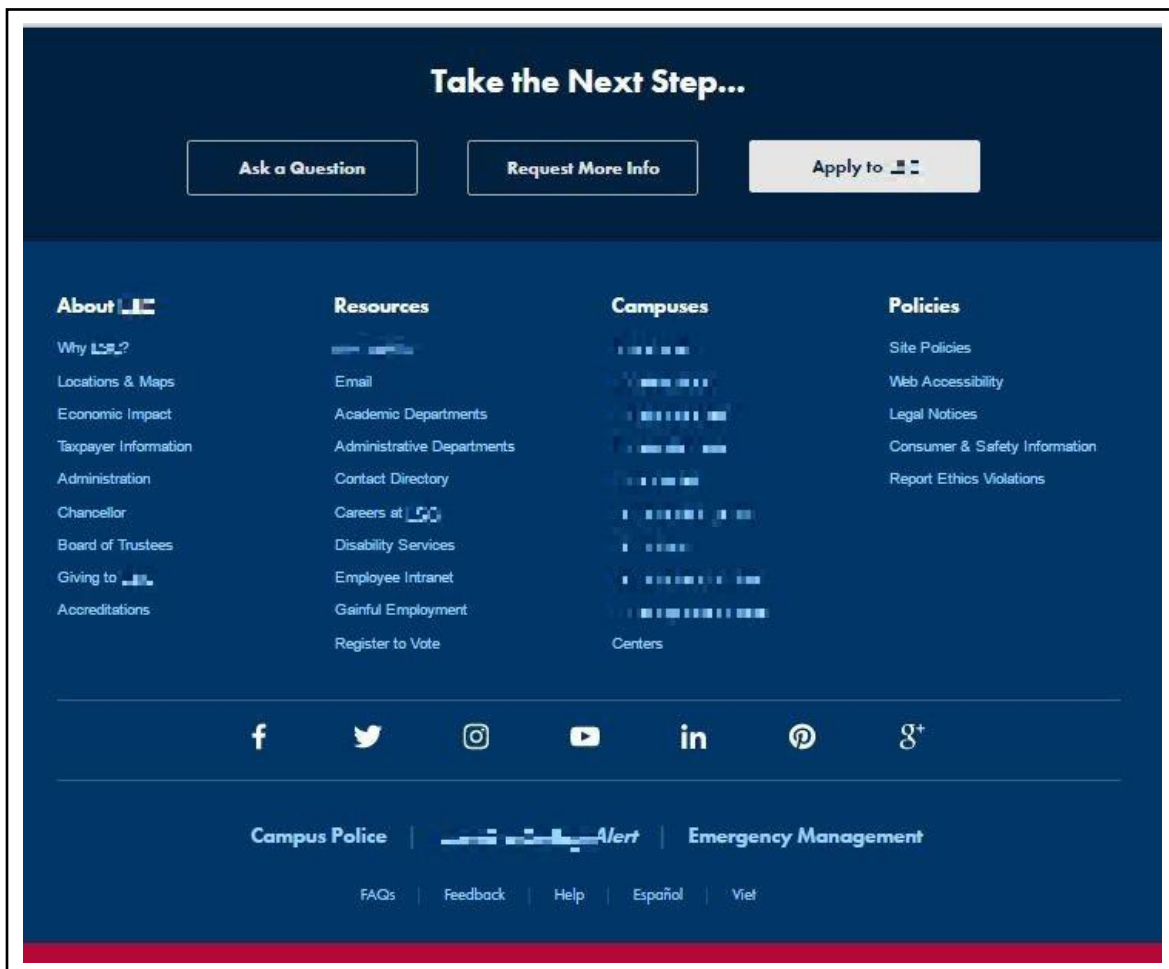


Figure 5. The template footer for orientation pages at Institution Two.

Twenty-six web pages, 38 orientation module slides, and 6 videos associated with the orientation program for Institution Two were examined for this study.

Next, I present examples for each tenet of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. The questions posited in this study are not comparing or contrasting the institutions, but instead seeking to ascertain the ways in which these orientation programs adhere to the tenets. Thus, the findings are presented in sequence of the factors and the deconstructed codes within each factor.

### **Results for the Transactional Distance Tenet**

The first question for this study was: *to what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory?* The primary purpose in using Moore's Transactional Distance Theory when designing educational interactions is to decrease the social and cognitive distance between the participants in the learning environment. Huang et al. (2015a) found that the Learner-Instructor and Learner-Learner relationship were factors in determining the transactional distance felt by the student. Three deconstructed codes for each factor were gleaned from the survey statements that were part of the study by Huang et al. (2015a). Examples for each of code are provided in the section for this factor. Table 1, at the end of this section, provides a summary of the findings for the general tenet of transactional distance.

#### **Learner-Instructor Transactional Distance**

**Community Component to Course.** Most heavily in the orientation modules, but also in subtle ways as part of the orientation web materials, the instructor seemed to actively and passively attempt to connect the student with the institution. During the orientation modules, the instructors made active statements that seemed like an attempt to create a familial connection between the student and the institution. For the module at Institution One, one instructor was prompted to state, "I am very excited to welcome you, or welcome you back, to the [Institution One] family" (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). Shortly after, the second instructor reiterated this message by stating the students are now "part of the [Institution One] family" (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). During the first video as part of the orientation module at Institution Two, the first narrator noted that the institution is "close to home" (Narrator One, Institution Two). In the outlining of expectations surrounding the Student Code of Conduct, the instructor again seemed to frame the conversations in a familial tone stating, "like any community, [Institution One] has expectations of its members" (Instructor



Two, Institution One Orientation Script). The family symbolism continued on the orientation web pages. On the student services page for Institution One there were multiple statements about communal connection including "you're part of the [Institution One] family," "we're here to support you," and "several departments serving you and better understanding your individual needs."

In addition to the familial component of the orientation, many examples were noted through both orientation programs of the branding components of the institution and the connection to students. During slide 42 of the online orientation for Institution One, the instructor was prompted to bring up the history of the institution, the football team, and traditions that are cherished by the institution and could "connect you to your alma mater no matter where you go" (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). In the orientation module at Institution Two, fewer examples existed that illustrated connection to the institution. However, during the first live video, many satellite campuses were shown on the screen and described for the student.

Apparent efforts to connect the student to the institution also extended into the orientation web pages. A web page for Institution One titled "Visit [Institution One]" included a section with the header "Experience [Institution One]" in which students were given step-by-step instructions for how to travel to the institution, information for how to access a tour, and information about highlighted institutional landmarks. Another web page titled "Stay Connected" at Institution One offered students the opportunity to buy merchandise for the online campus in addition to giving information about student organizations, the honor society, and alumni involvement (see Figure 6). Finally, both institutions had established YouTube and Facebook pages that included promotional videos about the institution. A current or former student narrated most of these videos.

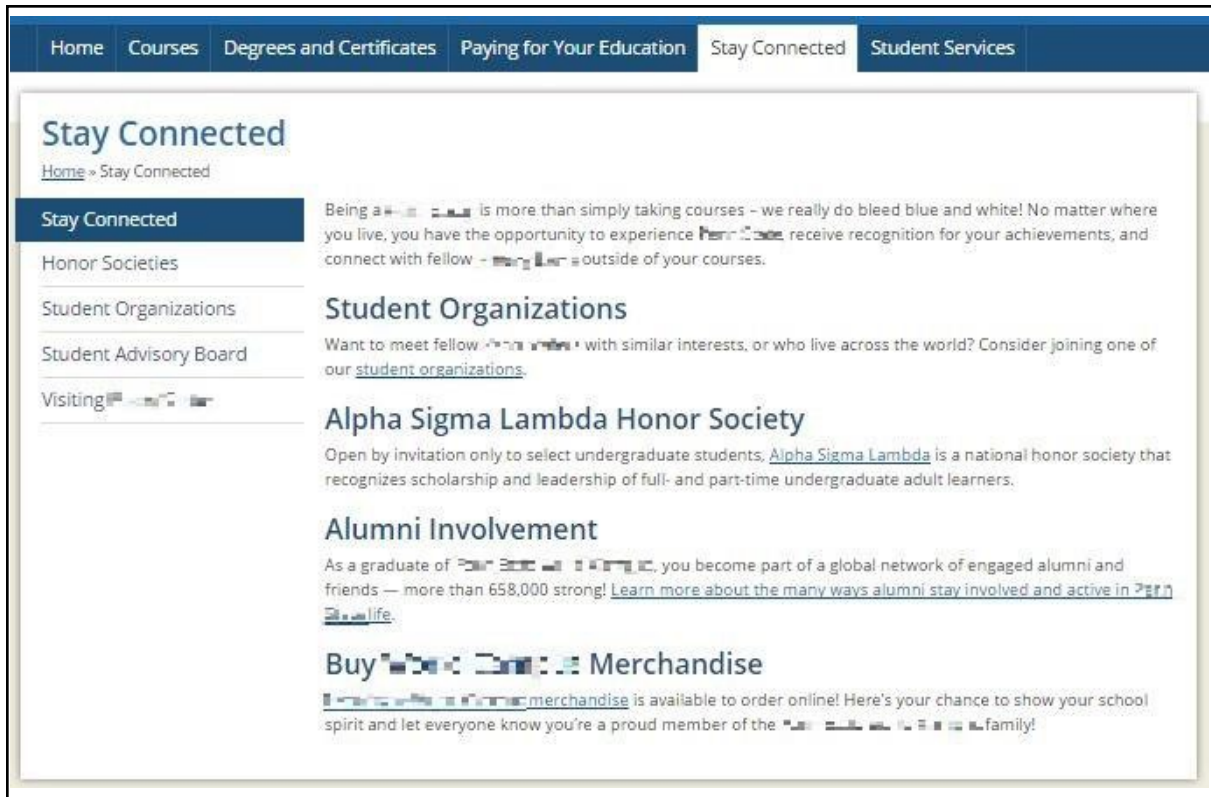


Figure 6. The stay connected page for Institution Two.

**Connection to Instructor.** One important member in the orientation process at both institutions was the academic advisor. In many ways they were presented as a co-instructor of the orientation material. The orientation web pages and orientation module was replete with information about contacting an academic advisor. At Institution Two the final step in the “New Student Online Orientation Process” was to “Complete an Online Advising and Registration session with an online advisor.” Therefore, it was important to include statements for the connection to the instructor both for the primary instructor of the material as well as the academic advisor.

Much of the learning for the orientation material was self-directed and self-paced. For each page in the orientation domain at both institutions there were contact tabs dedicated to the orientation office. This tab gave the student access to orientation staff members both in real time by way of a provided telephone number for business hours as well as an email address. The only other real time access the students received with the orientation instructors was during the orientation module for Institution One. During the module, students were interacting with the presentation in real time. They were able to interact with the instructor during polls and at the

end of the presentation during the Q&A portion of the presentation. The instructor was able to respond to students by name. In addition, the instructor was prompted to state during the presentation that there were staff members “dedicated to providing you with technical support that you need to navigate your new campus” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script) and stated further that if they were “experiencing difficulty with any of the systems at [Institution One] we have help available for you” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script).

The most direct connection with an instructor was through many required or suggested interactions with an advisor during the orientation process. In some cases the responsibility was placed upon the student, as was the case at Institution Two where the advisor’s email and contact phone number was provided for students. Advising for the online students was accessed through a Live Chat portal that allowed the student to talk to the advisor in real time. At Institution One, the onus was placed upon the advisor to make the connection with the student. Students were told that the advisor would contact them after they had taken the ALEKS tutoring and assessment program and would review the results with them. During the orientation module the instructors were prompted multiple times in the script to highlight the connection between students and their advisor. Students were told:

Your adviser’s role is to help you understand your academic program, requirements, and advise you on any issues or concerns related to your major. Your adviser will help you explore opportunities for research, internships, and other types of engaged scholarship activities. And your adviser will be your advocate, cheerleader, support person, and sometimes the person who challenges you, challenges your decisions with different perspectives.” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script)

Students were also advised, “you should stay in contact with your advisor” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). Finally, during slide 36 the instructor made a statement that unequivocally linked the instructor, who was presenting the orientation, with advisors stating that students “should definitely contact your advisor whenever you have a question or concerns. We are here to help you!” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script).

**Instructor Presence.** There was very little instructor presence during either online orientation program. Most of the information was delivered asynchronously through the self-paced online orientation for Institution Two or the web page information. However, each orientation provided a few examples of the *Instructor Presence* code. As previously mentioned,

the advisors were highlighted as imperative contact points for the orientation. Students were given their contact information on many of the orientation pages for both institutions. An advising session was also one of the five steps of the orientation process at Institution Two. In addition, the live orientation module for Institution One was a tangible use of Web 2.0 technology that increased real time connection between the instructor and the student.

### **Learner-Learner Transactional Distance**

The self-paced nature of the orientation program resulted in few instances of learner-learner interaction. Fulfilling the orientation program at both institutions was presented primarily as a solo act. There were no examples of outcome achievements necessitating peer collaboration. Most often, students were associated with their peers only by inference.

**Connection to Peers Component.** The primary example for connection to peers was the online orientation module for Institution One. During portions of the presentation, students were given access to a live chat window and provided the opportunity to talk with each other. Also during the presentation, students responded to a poll and were able to see the live results. The students were not prompted to talk with one another during the orientation, but were actively discouraged from engaging with one another when the instructor closed the chat window while the formal presentation was underway. The only other example of active peer-to-peer interaction was the orientation Facebook page for Institution One. The description of the Facebook page stated, “Welcome to the Facebook page for [Institution One]. Interact with fellow students, alumni, and share what it means to be [Institution One] proud” (Institution One Facebook page).

The other examples of connection to peers were inferential. On many of the slides, that were part of the asynchronous orientation for Institution Two, static pictures were presented showing students walking in hallways, standing in front of buildings, and sitting in class (see Figure 7). In addition, direct quotes from students were provided on the Academic Support page for Institution One. A student identified as a Psychology Major was quoted as saying:

Working with the Office for Disability Services has done many wonders for my education at [Institution One]. Not only do they provide necessary accommodations for me, since I am deaf, but they also provide many scholarships, of which I was fortunate to obtain. (Institution One Academic Support Page)

On the same page a student identified as Business major was quoted as saying:

The tutors understand the unique needs of distance learners and offer a variety of times and methods of communication to help guide you through your lessons. Not only do they help you with your studies, they also make you feel like part of the [Institution One] family. (Institution One Academic Support Page)

The only other quote from a student that was present as part of the orientation program appeared on the Student Responsibilities page. A student identified as an Information Sciences and Technology major was quoted as saying “my advisor did an excellent job in answering my questions in a timely fashion or referring me to the person who could answer my questions.” (Institution One Student Responsibilities Page)

These quotes were the only places in Institution One’s orientation pages in which quotes were present and offset through the use of italics and adding color to words. Finally, the YouTube pages for both institutions hosted institutional advertising videos that highlighted the experiences of students. While not directly stating the need for students to connect or learn from one another, the statements and quotes implied that students would be engaging with each other at the institution.

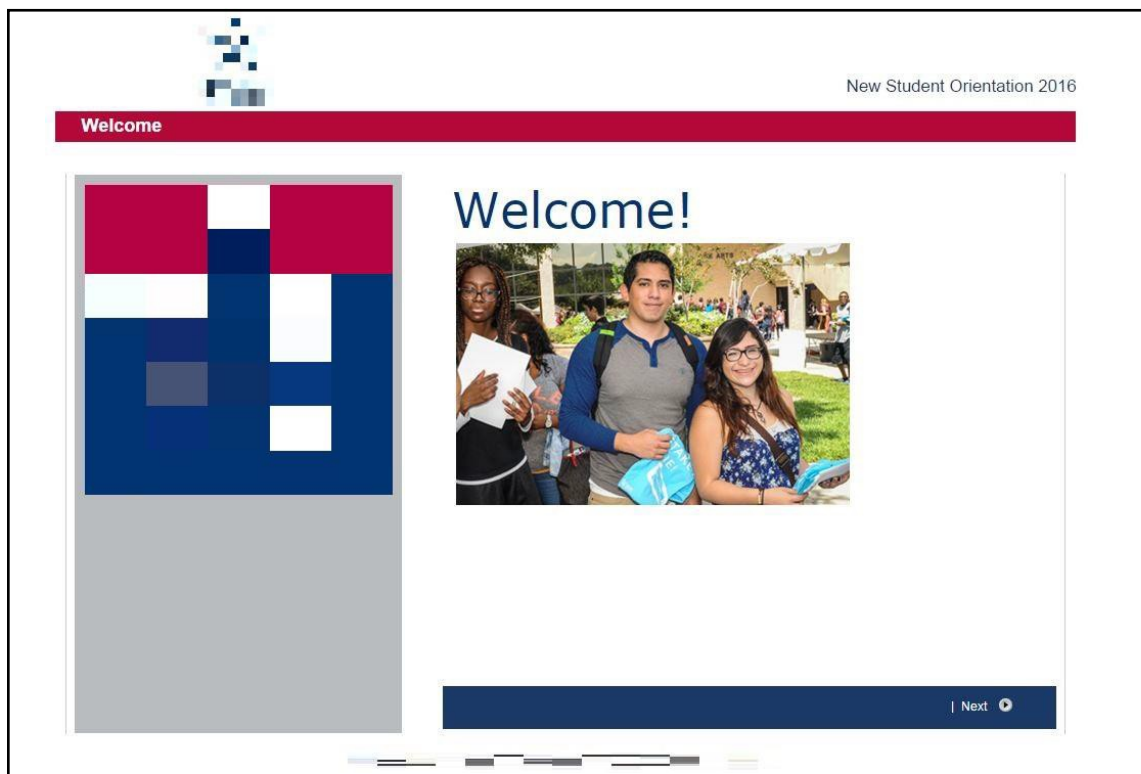


Figure 7. Welcome page for asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two.

## Peer Presence and Isolation

Examples of Peer Presence were seen the least as part of Institution Two’s orientation. At no point were the students present with other students. They were also never prompted to reach out to their peers directly. The only example of Peer Presence was during the live orientation module for Institution One. However, the only time the students could interact with one another was during informal components of the presentation. During the formal presentation the chat window was unavailable for students to interact.

The lack of peer interaction in both orientation programs is the highlighted example of the isolation component. I was unable to find examples, aside from the live orientation, that would have decreased a student’s feeling of isolation during the self-paced components of the orientation programs.

In summary, Huang et al. (2005a) teased out statements to identify transactional distance as one of the tenets of Moore’s theory. Few examples for the deconstructed codes within this tenet were found in either orientation program. Many of the statements from which the codes were deconstructed referenced interactions between members of the learning environment. Since much of the orientation programs were offered in an asynchronous format, few direct interactions were mandated or needed. The synchronous orientation program for Institution One bore the most examples of interactions and therefore, most of the examples for this tenet were in reference to this Web 2.0 environment. However, each institution orientation program provided examples of inferential connection, either with the institution or faculty and peers. Finally, the student most often initiated interactions with members of the teaching team through email or telephone.

Table 1.

### *Question 1 - Summary of Examples for Transactional Distance Tenet*

To what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory?

<b>Learner-Instructor Transactional Distance</b>	
<i>Community Component to Course</i>	The examples provided for this code were primarily focused on connecting the student to the institution. Feelings of pride in the university and a familial connection dominated the examples from both institutions.

<i>Connection to Instructor</i>	Many of the examples for students' connection to the instructor were made in reference to the academic advisor, a member of the teaching team. In most cases the contact was initiated by the student by way of email addresses and phone numbers provided by the instructor.
<i>Instructor Presence</i>	There was very little use of web 2.0 technologies, which limited the amount of time an instructor could be present in real time. The only examples occurred in the synchronous orientation at Institution Two. All other examples of instructor presence required initiation by the student.
<b>Learner-Learner Transactional Distance</b>	
<i>Connection to Peers Component</i>	Many of the examples were inferential. Pictures included on the site and orientation slide were of students and some quotes were from students. Students were encouraged to interact with each other directly during the synchronous orientation and Facebook page for Institution One.
<i>Peer Presence and Isolation</i>	The only example of peer presence was during the synchronous orientation at Institution One. The lack of interaction between students was the primary example of isolation for students.

### **Results for the Dialogue Tenet**

The second question for this study was: *to what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue?* The Dialogue tenet refers primarily to the type and frequency of contact between two individuals. Huang et al. (2015a) identified Learner-Instructor and Learner-Learner interactions as the interactions that had significance for the Dialogue tenet. Table 2, at the end of this section, provides a summary of the findings for the Dialogue tenet.

#### **Learner-Instructor**

Similar to the Transactional Distance tenet, examples of the Learner-Instructor factor for the Dialogue tenet disproportionately required initiation by the student. There were multiple examples at both institutions for each code within this factor.

**Recurring Contact.** The primary example of recurring contact within the orientations was the multiple prompts to talk with an advisor. While there was contact information provided for many of the topic areas, it was not provided for all topic areas and the student was prompted most often to contact the staff members if they were in need of more information. In addition, the only staff member that was highlighted as proactively communicative was the advisor.

At both institutions the advisor was highlighted as a recurring communicator with the student. As previously stated, during the synchronous online orientation module at Institution One the instructor stated that the advisor would contact the student once they had completed the ALEKS assessment. For Institution Two, the student was prompted to complete an online advising and registration session with their advisor. However, with both institutions it was only these interactions that were prompted by the advisor. In every other case, the student was told that the advisor was available to answer questions and work with them. While that relationship was highlighted as imperative, there was no mandate requiring the student to have recurring conversations with their advisor or other instructors throughout the orientation program.

**Types of Communication Technology.** A broad array of communication technology was used in both orientation programs. The most frequently used technology to communicate information to the student was text. The web pages for both institutional orientations contained white backgrounds to highlight the black text that dominated the pages. Information was presented under topic headers. Most of the information was presented in paragraph form. In many cases, the student was given the opportunity to learn more about a topic by clicking on a hyperlink to a document file. These files were presented in many different formats including PowerPoint presentations, Adobe pdf files, and Word documents.

The second most frequently used uni-directional communication was video. At Institution One the course management page and the library services page used videos as the only form of communication outside of topic headers and intro sentences. In addition, videos were included in the orientation module for Institution Two. Finally, videos were also found on the YouTube and Facebook pages for both institutions. These pages included personal stories from students as well as process overview videos (see Figure 8).



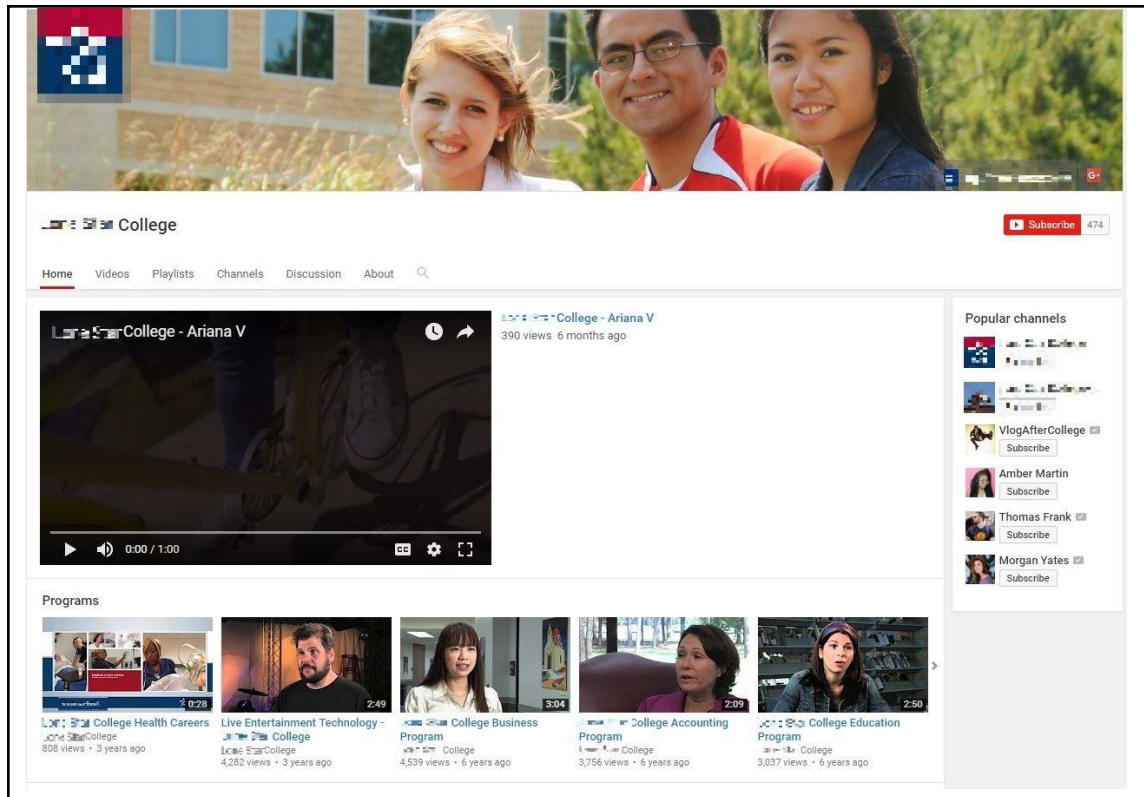


Figure 8. YouTube page for Institution Two.

The orientation programs at both institutions were vastly different. The orientation module for Institution Two used online orientation software called Comevo. The presentation platform was asynchronous and therefore uni-directional. In addition to videos, the presentation also included audio narration of the slide information. When a slide was opened the audio narration automatically began and the narrator read the words on the slide. The orientation program at Institution One was presented on the Adobe Connect platform. The platform included a main screen for slides that were presented by the instructor. The platform allowed the instructor to present information audibly and in real time. In addition, a box in the bottom left of the screen included links to orientation web pages. Finally, a text window was included at the bottom of the platform. During the presentation, the Adobe Connect polling application was also used. While Institution One was the only institution in this study to use a bi-directional communication tool for the orientation module, there were other examples of pieces of technology that allowed the learner and instructor to communicate.

The primary bi-directional technological tools used to communicate at both institutions were phone and email. Students were prompted on almost every orientation web page to contact

an office or specific person by using the email and/or phone number that was given. However, at both institutions a system for real time online chatting with an advisor was available through the learning management system. An additional real time chat platform was included as part of the Tutoring and Technology resources page at Institution Two. Students were given a hyperlink to begin a session with a tech tutor during designated times. The final piece of communication technology was social media. Each institution included links on their pages to their social media accounts for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Google Plus, YouTube, and Pinterest.

**Real Time Communication.** The only two mandated real time communication opportunities between instructor and learner was the advising sessions at both institutions and the synchronous orientation at Institution One. Both institutions managed advising sessions through the learning management system. Students were able to chat in real time with their advisor during a scheduled meeting time. Institution One required attendance at the synchronous online orientation program. The students were able to interact with the instructor through the use of polling and a chat window.

The student was also given the option to communicate in real time by phone. At the top of all orientation pages for both institutions was a “contact us” tab that directed the student to a telephone number for real time contact during business hours. In addition, individual office pages such as the Admissions page at Institution One and the Financial Aid page at Institution Two contained a phone number for the student to contact the office in real time. Students were also given the option at Institution One to chat in real time with the Help Desk.

One way that Institution One mimicked real time communication was by using FAQs. On the Student Resources and Bursar page there were Frequently Asked Questions highlighted. Students were able to click on the question and then read the full answer to those questions. While not technically in real time, the FAQ model answered questions the students may have had in the moment. They were getting the answer from the instructor in real time.

**Dynamic Communication.** There were many tools given to students at both institutions to communicate with instructors and staff. Most of this communication had to be initiated by the student. Instructors provided many examples of the traditional methods of communication through phone and email provided to students. At Institution One, during the real time orientation module, the last slide provided the contact information or hyperlinks for 11 departments including “Academic Support,” “Academic Advising,” “Bursar Office,” “Career

Counseling,” “Financial Aid Office,” “Help Desk,” “Mental Health Services,” “Registrar Office,” “Proctoring,” “Student Affairs,” and “Transfer Credit Specialists.” In addition, students at Institution One were provided contact information on the following orientation web pages: Academic Integrity, Academic Support, Access Account and IT Fees, Admissions, Bursar, and Career Services. Career Services was the only department at Institution One that included an AOL IM account in addition to email and phone. The Access Account and IT Fees page provided a dead “contact us” hyperlink. All of the specific department contacts were provided in addition to the general orientation office “contact us” information which included a toll free number, local number, fax number, and email that was linked as a tab on the page in the orientation domain. Contact information was less frequent on pages for Institution Two. As part of the asynchronous orientation module, contact information for the student to engage in dynamic communication was only provided in two ways. The first was the inclusion of the institution address and phone number on the bottom of each slide as part of the template. The second was contact information for the compliance officers as part of the Compliance for Title IX slide. A few of the orientation web pages also provided contact information. The welcome page in the orientation domain for Institution Two included a hyperlinked button at the bottom of the page for students to “Ask a Question.” Students could also contact the Financial Aid Contact Center by submitting a financial aid question on the Financial Aid page as well as emailing the Financial Aid office by clicking a hyperlinked email address that auto-populated in an email client. The Advising page for Institution Two included a hyperlink specifically for students taking courses online that granted access to online student support.

### **Learner-Learner**

The learner-learner factor included similar codes to the learner-instructor factor for the dialogue tenet. However, so few examples were found at both institutions that the findings are presented together. One of the only communication technologies used by both institutions to engage learner with learner was the social media applications that were provided. Both institutions had a Twitter and Facebook page that could be used to engage students with one another. Only Institution Two specifically noted on their Facebook page that it was a place to “interact with fellow students” (Institution Two Facebook Page). Neither institution provided prompts that encouraged students to build relationships during orientation. Yet, the inclusion of

student videos on the Facebook pages of both institutions could have served as one way to promote students build relationships.

One example of learner-learner communication opportunities and technology was the synchronous online module for Institution One. At the end of the presentation students were able to engage with one another within the chat window. This type of communication was both in real time and could be used for relationship building. There were very few examples of learner-learner dialogue at either institution.

In summary, operational examples of the dialogue tenet were almost all relegated to learner-instructor dialogue. Primarily, the student used many types of communication technology to initiate communication. In most cases communication was asynchronous. However, during the synchronous orientation programs and through the use of the phone numbers provided on almost every page, students were able to speak with the instructor in real time. These types of technology were rarely provided for students to engage with their peers in either orientation program. The bulk of dialogue, although limited, was through social media applications and the asynchronous orientation module at Institution One.

Table 2.

*Question 2 - Summary of Examples for Dialogue Tenet*

To what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue?

<b>Learner-Instructor Dialogue</b>	
<i>Recurring Contact</i>	Few examples were provided in which the student was instructed to maintain recurring contact with the instructor or the orientation program identified recurring points of contact initiated by the instructor. Assessment programs like ALEKS at Institution One resulted in the academic advisor contacting the student but most of the initiation between the instructor and the student was instigated as needed by the student.
<i>Types of Communication Technology</i>	The types of communication technology used in the orientation programs included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Text (primary)</li> <li>• PowerPoint</li> <li>• Adobe Pdf Files</li> <li>• Word Documents</li> <li>• Videos (imbedded and linked)</li> <li>• Facebook</li> <li>• Youtube</li> <li>• Twitter</li> <li>• GooglePlus</li> <li>• Pinterest</li> <li>• Comevo</li> <li>• Adobe Connect</li> <li>• Phone</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Chat Platforms through LMS</li> </ul>
<i>Real Time Communication</i>	The two examples of real time communication were the advising sessions for both institutions which were required for the student and the mandated synchronous online orientation module for Institution One. Additional examples were optional communication between the student and instructor by way of phone, email, and chat applications. The FAQs provided on a few orientation pages at Institution One was an example of interactions which mimics real time communication.
<i>Dynamic Communication</i>	Students were given the option to maintain the level of communication they needed. Both orientation programs provided contact information on virtually every page. The onus was placed upon the student to engage with the instructor to gather more information on a specified content area. There, while not mandated, many options were given to the student to maintain dynamic communication with the instructor.
<b>Learner-Learner Dialogue</b>	
<i>Summary</i>	Few examples of learners engaging with their peers were provided in either orientation program. Social media provided a primary leverage point for communication. However, only the Facebook page for Institution One provided a directed statement for students to use the platform as a relationship-building environment or peer communication tool. The synchronous orientation program at Institution One provided an example of learner-learner communication but only at the end of the module.

## Results for the Structure Tenet

The third question for this study was: *to what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure?* The examples of the structure tenet were identified in both the direction given to the student, whether specific or inferential, as well as the tangible components of the orientation. Therefore, the structure tenet was broken into two factors, Learner-Content and Learner-Interface. Table 3, at the end of this section, provides a summary of the findings for the dialogue tenet.

### Learner-Content

Most researchers examine structure with a primary aim of identifying the impact of flexibility since that is the primary component of Moore's original definition. However, Huang et al. (2015a) combined flexibility with formality in the Learner-Content factor as contributory in their instrument.

**Flexibility.** The flexibility factor references the ability for a student to attain some level of ownership over both the content being delivered as well as the structure of the delivery. Moore postulated that the student would experience a lower transactional distance if they see a change in the content of the course based upon their personal learning needs articulated to the instructor. This factor was broken down into nine codes.

**Feedback Received.** There were few instances of required assignments in either orientation. Much of the feedback that was given to the students came from academic advisors. From the outset of the orientation at both institutions the advisor was identified as a staff member who would respond to the student. At Institution One the student was contacted by their advisor after completing the SmarterMeasure assessment. During the synchronous orientation module, the script prompted the instructor to state:

Say that SmarterMeasure indicates you might have some difficulty with time management based on other commitments in your life. Your academic advisor can help you set realistic expectations about the number of courses that you schedule and which courses you schedule in combination with others, and can make recommendations for support services such as tutoring. It's a great way for us to get to know you and to use assessment information to help you be more successful. (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script)

For Institution Two, the advisor was able to give feedback on the online readiness assessment during the mandatory online advising and registration session. In addition, at the end of the asynchronous orientation module for Institution Two, the student was required to take a quiz. The results of the quiz were displayed and if the score was below an 80% the student was required to retake the quiz, in effect receiving feedback.

***Feedback Mechanisms.*** As previously mentioned, the advisors were able to deliver feedback to the student through real time digital meetings by using applications built into the learning management system. However, there were also mechanisms for students to share feedback with the orientation programs and their representatives. On the Academic Advising page for Institution One, the student was prompted to “Provide Feedback About Advising.” The instructions stated, “You can help us provide the best support possible. Please leave feedback about your recent advising appointment by emailing.” The statement was followed by a hyperlinked email address that auto-populates an email client window. Students were also prompted to “tell us how we’re doing” by sending an email or filling out an online dialogue box form on the Office for the Vice President of Information Technology web page.

In addition to these specific methods, the inclusion of social media accounts for both institutions presented an opportunity for students to give feedback. The prevalence of email addresses and phone numbers also provided an opportunity for students to give feedback if needed.

***Question Mechanisms.*** The mechanisms for students to ask questions were prevalent throughout both orientations. However, almost all took the singular form of email. Students were prompted on virtually every orientation web page to email or call the appointed office for more information. One example was the Scholarships page for Institution One on which, at the bottom of the page under the header “Questions?”, the instructions stated, “if you have questions about scholarships and opportunities, we are here to help. Please email.” This statement was followed by a hyperlinked email to the financial aid email address that auto-populates to an email client. Finally, during the synchronous orientation module for Institution One, students were given the option to ask questions through the chat box which could only be seen by the instructor. After the formal presentation, students were given the opportunity to ask more questions in a chat box that every participant was able to see.

***Self-Paced.*** At no point during either institution's orientation were time limits or a structured curricular approach presented to the student on the orientation informational web pages. The topic areas at both institutions were presented on the orientation web page as hyperlinks and the student was given the option of examining the material at their own pace and in the order they deemed appropriate to their learning.

The only point at which the instructor dictated the student's learning was during the orientation modules. The orientation module at Institution One was scheduled. The student was required to sign up for a specific time. The instructor also presented the orientation and the student was primarily a passive learner. The orientation module for Institution Two could be viewed at the speed the student wished because the link to the orientation was sent to the student and the student had total control over viewing the presentation. However, the student was not able to skip around the presentation. The presentation was given in slide order and the student only has access to click "next."

***Mechanisms for Change.*** With limited feedback mechanisms in either orientation, mechanisms for change were similarly scarce. The only example of mechanisms for change that could be found at either institution was in the fact the entirety of the web page based orientation was self-paced. Therefore, students could move through the material in the order they saw fit which could be different than the intended learning structure the instructor had in mind during the creation of the program.

***Tailored Learning.*** The concept of tailored learning combined the impact of a self-paced environment with the presentation of material in a way that allowed the student to only learn the information they needed or wanted. The almost entirely self-paced nature of both orientation programs provided a high number of examples of tailored learning. Many of the technical examples were used on multiple pages, encouraging students to learn information that was new to them and would be useful to their specific future needs.

The primary delivery method of information that allowed students to tailor their own learning was through the use of hyperlinked material. These hyperlinks, to specific documents or web pages containing more material, allowed students to pick and choose what information they sought. The hyperlinked material for Institution One most often appeared as part of the main content material contained in the whitespace of the informational orientation pages. A topic area header was followed by an overview of the information generally applicable to all



students. Students could then click on hyperlinked words or phrases to be redirected to extra information pertaining to that specific subject. Examples included:

- The Bursar page included a section for which the student is given the option “Following are links to some helpful information.” Hyperlinks were provided for “Signing up Parents/Others as Authorized Payers,” “Signing up for eRefund,” “Installment Payment Plan,” “Permission to use Federal Aid,” the institutional portal, and “Billing Help.”
- In the Courses page the student was given the option to click on the “prep for courses” materials. This information was presented as recommended but not required.
- On the financial aid, hyperlinks were provided for “Dropping” and “Withdrawing” as well as to “Learn more about accepting, declining and decreasing financial awards in [the institutional portal].”
- For the page titled “Find a Course” students were prompted to “View a tutorial to learn more about searching classes in [the institutional portal].”
- On the Grading System page, the student was prompted to click on a hyperlink to “Learn more about Dean’s List eligibility criteria.”
- Students were prompted on the New Student Assessment page that the ALEKS assessment was recommended but not required. They were given a link to begin the assessment.
- A list of six payment option pages was hyperlinked on the Paying Your Semester Bill page in addition to a hyperlink to “Learn more about accepting your financial aid” (see Figure 9).
- The Scheduling Courses page included a statement that directs the student to “use our course preparation list to get ready for the upcoming semester.” Below this statement was a list of hyperlinks.
- As the title suggested, the Student Resources page provided students with hyperlinks to read more about disability services, library services, and tutoring services.
- The Students with Disabilities page provided a hyperlink for students to review the information about “accommodation documentation guidelines.”

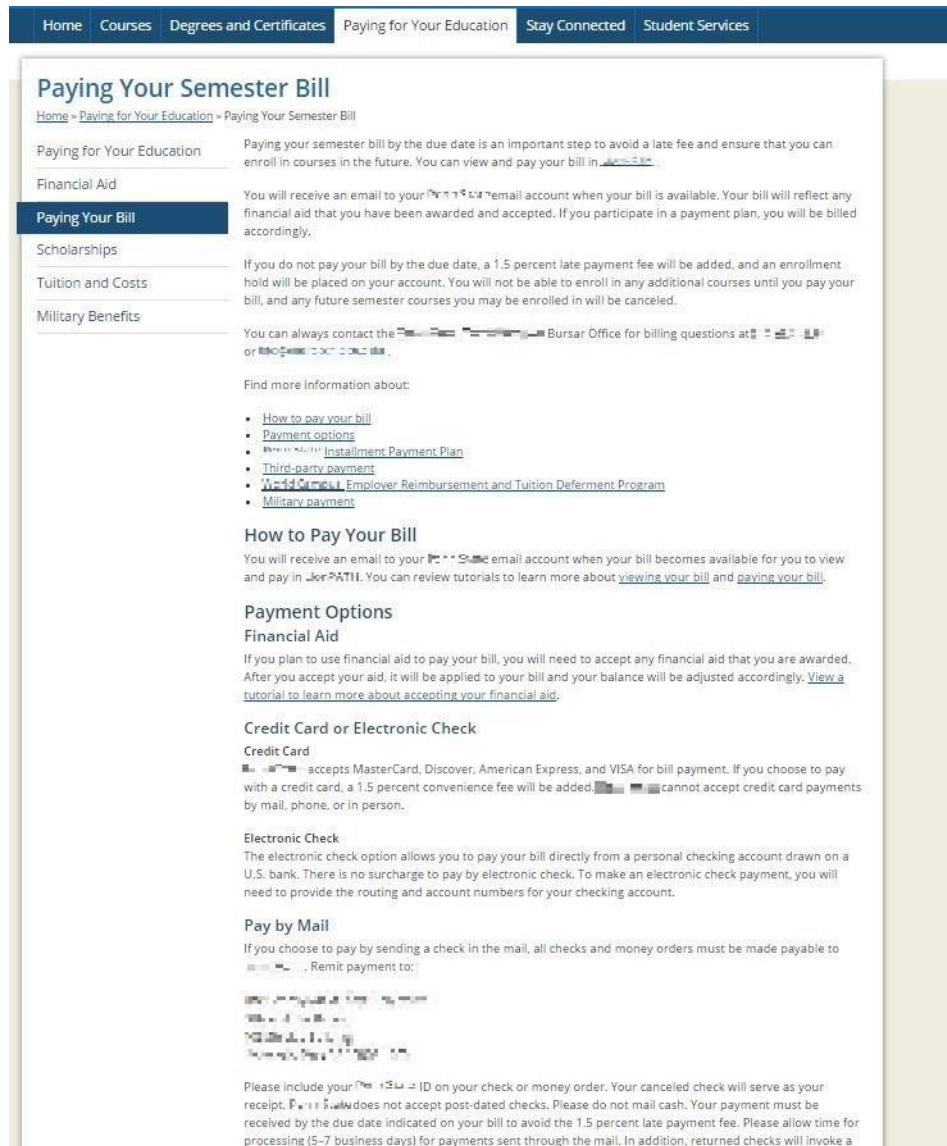


Figure 9. An example of an information page with hyperlinks at Institution One

The examples of tailored learning at Institution Two were similar in the primary use of hyperlinks but different in the manner the hyperlinks were presented. The Financial Aid page provides expandable information boxes. The topic title was clickable and, once clicked, a dialogue box expanded to reveal additional information about the topic area. In addition, most of the supplementary information was provided in boxes with grey boundaries that were on the right of the page. For example, on the Meningitis page the greyed box contained the header “Important Information” and included a list of PDF files for “How to Meet the Bacterial Meningitis Requirement,” “Setting up a Magnus Account,” and “Submitting Proof of Bacterial Meningitis Vaccine.” There was an additional greyed box with the header Resources &

Information with hyperlinks to “College Vaccine Requirements,” “[State] Health & Human Services Immunizations Branch,” “[County] Public Health & Environmental Services,” and “[County] Hospital District.” The Meningitis page for Institution Two also included a traditional section header in white space titled About Bacterial Meningitis followed by a description paragraph and additional links below the paragraph titled “Symptoms of the Disease,” “Transmission of the Disease,” “Reducing Your Risks of Infection,” and “When to Return to School/Work” that was similar to the examples at Institution One.

The synchronous orientation module at Institution One limited the amount of tailored learning the student could experience. However, at multiple points throughout the presentation, the instructor was prompted to direct the student to the website for more information. This occurred during a discussion on the SmarterMeasure assessment as well as proctoring. In addition, a “Helpful Links” window was included in the presentation platform. This window contained hyperlinked topic areas that redirected the student to the website that contained the topic information. These were the only examples of tailored learning present in the Institution One orientation module.

One component of the tailored learning code was the ability of students to apply their learning to real-world experiences. Many of the examples provided in the previous sections were orientation topic areas for which students had a responsibility. Therefore, students were given the opportunity to tailor their learning to only the areas for which they were deficient in that knowledge area. Once learned, each piece of knowledge was expected to be used by the student to achieve a particular requirement of their educational experience.

***Course Delivery Formats.*** The primary course delivery format for both Institution One and Two was text. During the asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two, text was the primary mode of course delivery. While audio narration was provided on most slides, it was merely a verbatim account of the slide text. Video was also used to deliver course material. This was present on a few web pages including the course management system and library page for Institution One. It was also present in the asynchronous orientation module for Institution Two. However, in the videos for Institution One, the video was divided into individual content areas for the topic. During the videos for the orientation at Institution Two, the videos were a medium to deliver text slides displayed during the video. Many of the videos could be described as a mixture of audio and text learning since the video was not necessary to the learning.

**Instruction Strategies.** There were few instructional strategies aside from one-way information delivery. At both institutions, the primary form was text documents, web pages, and video material. In each case this strategy provided the information to the student directly. One could see the Facebook page interactions between students as a strategy but only Institution One directly stated that the Facebook page was intended for student interaction and the primary purpose implied was for community building rather than material learning. In addition, assessment materials such as SmarterMeasure at Institution One forced students to reflect with their advisor about their learning. However, there were no additional prompts for students to learn in other manners.

**Assessment.** Assessment as a direct method for the measurement of learning was only present in one example. For the asynchronous orientation at Institution Two, the student was prompted on the second slide “To receive credit and have the hold released from your student account, you must complete the assessment at the end and score an overall 80%.” The quiz was a set of 12 multiple-choice questions. These questions directly referenced material presented during the asynchronous orientation program.

**Formality.** The flexibility factor for the Structure tenet references Moore’s belief that transactional distance is lessened if the student is able to have some modicum of control over their learning. Subsequent researchers assert that having formalized structures in conjunction with some flexibility results in a lessening of transactional distance. Huang et al. (2015a) proposed that formality and flexibility are not incompatible if formality is seen as taking the student’s background into account in concert with providing a variety of educational approaches are taken into account. Formality is present in traditional academic courses primarily because curriculum is a primary component of the pedagogical approach. However, formality was difficult to find in either institutional orientation programs. As referenced later in this section, curricular learning component examples were extremely rare, resulting in a dearth of examples of subsequent codes in the formality factor.

**Defined Objectives.** Defined objectives were not found anywhere in the orientation web pages for either institution. There were examples of requirements for the student that were provided on the primary landing page for each institution but they did not provide context for any of those responsibilities. Both orientation modules, however, did provide defined objectives for the student. At the outset of the synchronous orientation module at Institution One the

instructor was prompted to state, “by the end of our time together, you should have a pretty good understanding of what it’s like to take [institutional] courses online and be able to access the resources that you need to begin your first course” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). In addition, students were provided a slide during this statement that outlines the presentation topic areas including “Structure of [the institution] and online learning,” “How online learning works,” “Setting realistic expectations,” and “The [Institution] Curriculum.” The subsequent slide listed additional topic areas to be covered in the orientation presentation including: “Evaluation of transfer credits,” “Academic advising,” “Academic support,” and “Getting connected.” The asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two also included one example of defined objectives. The opening page of the orientation listed the following topic to be covered: “About [the institution],” “Academics,” “Handling Student Business,” “Enrolling for Classes,” “Campus Resources and Services,” and “Student Life”. Included on this page was the statement “you will receive valuable information that will help you successfully transition into the [institution] environment.” These objectives were neither clearly defined nor detailed as the deconstructed statement would suggest. However, they were provided at the beginning of the orientation program.

***Rubric for Assignments.*** Rubrics can take a number of forms. The Rubric for Assignments code included any specific guidelines that outline the steps a student must take to complete a task. During the synchronous orientation module at Institution One, the instructor was prompted to outline the proper steps to use the learning management system (LMS). The instructor stated:

Before you can do business in [the institution LMS], you’ll need to activate your [institution] Access Account. Following your acceptance to [the institution], you received an account activation email. Go to the link in that email and follow all of the instructions to activate your account. Then you’ll be able to access [the institution LMS], Webmail, [institution systems], and other [institution] systems.

The first time you log in to [the institution LMS], you must sign the Consent to Do Business Electronically agreement in order to use the system. While not technically a part of enrollment, this screen will prevent all other actions until students have clicked the box to indicate their agreement. If you do not agree, you will have to conduct [the institution LMS] business outside of the system.

You will not be eligible to enroll in classes until you have completed the Pre-Registration Activity Guide, which includes verification of emergency contact information and the Financial Responsibility Agreement or FRA. The FRA is a promise to take financial responsibility for payment of your student account. A Financial Responsibility hold will remain on your account until you have completed the Activity Guide. The Activity Guide can be found in your To Do List within the [the institution LMS] Student Center.

Once these tasks are done you will be able to register for courses through the Academics section of your student center. Some courses are held for students in specific majors and must be put on your schedule manually by our Registrar staff. Your academic adviser will let you know if you're scheduling any of these courses and give you instructions.

Once you register, a bill will be generated for the number of credits that you have registered for. This bill will be available to you on the first day of the month after you register. As an example, if you were to register for your fall classes in July your bill would be available to you on August 1st. You can view your bill by selecting the "Manage My Account" link in the finances section of your student center in [the institution LMS]. (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script)

The orientation pages also contained examples of rubrics and guidelines. The courses page for Institution One contained a header that stated, "Preparing for Your Courses." Underneath this header was a checklist of statements that should be completed before the classes start. Each statement contained a hyperlink which gave additional guidelines to complete that step. The Grading System page included guidelines for the "Process for Choosing Pass/Fail Option." The first step was the statement of the required date for completion. The next step linked the form that was needed. The final step included the email and fax number to send the form. Similar step-by-step guideline statements were provided on the Graduation page under the header "How to Set Your Intent to Graduate."

Institution One's orientation pages also included rubrics and guidelines, which supplied more in-depth expectations. On the Student Responsibilities and Advising Support page, steps were provided with supplemental direction. For example, the first step was "Think about your academic goals" and the supplemental material stated:

We encourage you to think about what you want to get out of your degree or what you want it to help you achieve in your life. This is important to do before choosing courses, and if you are unsure about the major you have chosen, you can discuss this with your advisor. Your advisor will be able to discuss other options available to you at [the institution] and help you determine what is best for you (Institution One Student Responsibilities and Advising Support Page).

Similarly, the Taking Exams and Securing a Proctor page included an eight-step guideline for “How to Make Proctor Arrangements and Take Exams.” It also included supplemental guidelines to increase the student’s understanding about how to achieve the course-related task as expected. The section stated:

Follow these steps to ensure that you will be ready to take your exam with an approved proctor:

1. **Decide whether you will take exams at an exam center or with an individual proctor.**
2. If you plan to take exams with an individual proctor, your proctor must be approved. **For new proctors, review our proctor requirements** to ensure that your proctor is qualified and collect any required documentation of the proctor's position.
3. **Nominate your proctor for approval using our proctored exam portal.** You will receive an email from [department email] to your [institution] email account, notifying you whether your proctor has been approved.
4. When your proctor is approved, or if you decide to take your exam at an exam center, log in to our proctored exam portal and **choose the proctor or exam center for the exam you wish to schedule.**
5. **Once you have chosen your proctor or exam center, you must still schedule the exam.**
  - For the Outreach Testing Center, you can schedule your exam in the proctored exam portal.
  - For any other testing center, or for an individual proctor, you must contact the exam center or proctor to schedule the exam. Note that some exam centers require two weeks' advance notice to schedule exams.

6. **Review our exam procedures to prepare for your exam.** You and your proctor will both also receive email reminders of your exam and our exam procedures.
7. **Take your exam at your scheduled exam time and location.** You must begin your exam at the beginning of the exam time you have scheduled. Contact the HelpDesk if you or your proctor experience any technical difficulties with accessing the exam.
8. **If you are unable to take your exam during the scheduled exam dates, you must notify us:**
  - Notify your proctor and determine whether you can reschedule the exam within the scheduled exam dates.
  - If you must reschedule the exam outside the exam dates, contact the course instructor to get permission. The course instructor can determine whether the exam can be taken outside the scheduled dates and provide access to the exam accordingly. The instructor should email permission to [institution] at [institution email].
  - Notify [institution] in advance of any changes to your exam arrangements at [phone number] (Institution One Taking Exams and Securing a Proctor Page).

In contrast, Institution Two provided only one true rubric or guideline for students to achieve the outcomes expected by the orientation instructor. The landing page for New Student Online Orientation included a five-step process for orientation. The only step that included additional information was the second that stated, “Take placement test or submit test scores; Visit our Placement Testing site for more information.” A hyperlink for the Placement Testing site was included. All other steps linked students to the form they needed to fill out or stated the step without any supplemental information or hyperlinks.

***Guidelines for Communication.*** Few clear guidelines for communication were presented in either orientation program. Communication was either inferentially or directly left up to the student. Emails, phone numbers, social media accounts, and chat applications were provided to the student but in each case the student was instructed to use the contact information when needed. The only direct requirement of communication was the fifth step for the orientation at Institution Two. It stated, “Complete an Online Advising and Registration session with an online advisor.” However, this directive was not hyperlinked to information about this session, nor was any additional information provided to supplement this requirement.



***Due Dates and Defined Schedule.*** No due dates or schedule were provided in either orientation program. While there were dates provided in the institution calendars that were linked from the orientation web pages at both institutions, these did not reflect due dates for the orientation program itself. In addition, the synchronous orientation module at Institution One was required and dates were provided for when they were offered but the offerings continued through the beginning of the semester and there was no mention of a mandated completion date. For Institution Two, five steps were outlined to complete the orientation program but no completion date was stated and the steps were not presented in a way that directed the student to follow them in order.

***Policies.*** Institution One’s landing page stated, “in addition to this interactive website, you can also attend an hour-long webinar. Webinars are offered several times each semester” (Institution One Orientation Landing Page). In addition, under the “Undergraduate Orientation Guide,” the statement “use this orientation guide to learn how to become a successful student and reach your academic goals” was provided (Institution One Orientation Landing Page). On Institution One’s landing page, while there are no directives about the orientation policies, there was an implicit expectation that the process was to be followed.

***Expectations.*** Few defined expectations were found in either orientation program. The information that was provided on the orientation web pages at both institutions was self-paced and self-guided. The only mandates that were outlined at the outset of either orientation were part of the program at Institution Two. The landing page for the orientation outlined the “New Student Online Orientation Process” in five steps. While there was no direct statement that these steps were mandatory, there was an implication that the student would fulfill all the steps. A more direct example of expectations was provided on the second slide of the asynchronous online orientation module for Institution Two. The slide stated, “to receive credit and to have the hold released from your student account, you must complete the assessment at the end and score an overall 80%” (Institution Two Orientation Module).

***Curricular Learning.*** Both institutions outlined specific content area modules on their orientation landing page. Institution One included the following seven topic areas: “Academic Structure at [the institution],” “What You Should Know About Online Learning,” “The Essential Parts of Your [Institution] Degree,” “Student Responsibilities and Advising Support,” “Academic Support,” “Registration and Financial Aid,” and “[Institution] Student Resources.”

Each topic was hyperlinked to a distinct content page. An additional example of curricular learning was on the Learning Management System page. Distinct videos were provided that were separated into individual curricular components for using the LMS.

For Institution Two, a similar list of topic areas was provided to the student. The list of hyperlinks included: “Admissions,” “Financial Aid,” “Bacterial Meningitis: What You Need to Know,” “Advising,” “Placement Testing,” “Transfer & Transcripts,” “Registration,” and “Books & Bookstore.” Each of these links directed the student to a distinct topic page with information that is focused on the topic material.

### **Learner-Interface**

An important part of decreasing the transactional distance due to structure is the student’s ability to interact with the orientation interface components that are hosting the material (Huang et al., 2015a). Therefore, the difference between the Learner-Content and Learner-Interface factors of the structure tenet is that the latter focuses on the tangible material components the instructor uses to present the orientation. The examples in this area are categorized by the factors determined by the research of Huang et al. (2015a) and the codes deconstructed for each of those factors. Asking for student perceptions of the interface was out of the scope of this study. Therefore, these findings are based upon my analysis of the interface used in each orientation program.

#### **Knowledge of Media Use.**

*Ease of Use and Common Technology.* It is impossible to create technology that is absolutely universal and intuitive. However, for both institution orientations, there were multiple examples of the use of common technology. The primary technology used to deliver the orientation was the traditional web page. Both institutions used a template for the primary orientation materials. Both institutions used large areas of primarily white space. This allowed for easy scrolling as well as easy discernment between differentiated information. One difference between the two institutions was the usability of the orientation content hyperlinks. Institution One provided a list of seven topic areas that acted as the orientation guide. For the pages that were part of the orientation domain, the same header and hyperlinks were present at the top and bottom of each page. The orientation page at Institution Two provided links for eight content areas. However, once students clicked on a content area hyperlink they had to use the “back” button on their web browser to return to the primary landing page to navigate to

additional topic areas. As a final note on the web page ease of use, Institution Two's web pages outside of the orientation domain remained consistent with the template the orientation pages used. However, at Institution One, each new department page used a different template. This may have decreased the ease of use, since new navigation protocols were necessary within the page.

The additional technology used by both institutions was easy to use. The synchronous orientation module at Institution One operated within Adobe Connect. However, the student did not need to know how to use the application. Once the student clicked on the hyperlink, a waiting screen opened in a web browser. Once the instructor launched the presentation, the student automatically entered the presentation. Within the presentation, the student was able to participate through a traditional chat window with a dialogue box for text entry. Hyperlinks were also available in an additional window allowing for easy navigation. The orientation module for Institution Two was also easy to navigate. The presentation was opened in a web browser. Once students entered their credentials the orientation module opened automatically. The student then clicked the "Next" button to navigate through the presentation. Most of the videos and audio narration in the presentation began automatically. Videos and audio narration could be easily paused and restarted.

Within the orientation modules at both institutions, videos were imbedded as well as linked to YouTube. In both instances, play buttons were easily discerned on the screen to launch the video. When social media site links were present, they were distinguished by their application symbols. Therefore, they could be seen as easily navigable.

### **Choice of Media Use.**

***Common Technology and Content Delivery Methods.*** Many common technologies were used to deliver orientation content. The primary technology for content deliver at both institutions was web pages. Within these pages there were many common applications that were used. On the orientation pages for Institution One the learning management page, military, and library pages contained embedded and YouTube videos with closed captioning. Videos were also a part of the asynchronous orientation module for Institution Two. Both institutional orientation pages contained hyperlinks that redirected the student to the additional information pages. They also contained links for .pdf and .doc files.

Email hyperlinks were present throughout both orientation programs. These hyperlinks auto-populated an email dialogue box for an email client. Finally, information was provided on common social media applications.

### **Visualization.**

*Content Well Organized and Content Visually Appealing.* The orientation-landing page for both institutions provided an outline of the content areas for each web page in the domain. This had the impact of making the content well organized. For the orientation modules at both institutions, the student was unable to reverse the direction of the presentation material without the use of the “back” button on the web browser. For Institution One, this was because the instructor controlled all aspects of the synchronous orientation module. For Institution Two, this was because the student only had access to a “Next” button and not a “Back” button. The limited navigation ability resulted in the student being able to receive the orientation information only in the manner the instructor designed. All web pages in the orientation domain used standard fonts and colors on white backgrounds. This increased the sense of organization, while also making the content visually appealing. There were notable exceptions for Institution One, however. Every web page that was outside of the orientation domain was built in a different template. Different templates required different navigation approaches. In addition, the “Be Safe” website was the only website, hyperlinked from the Office of the Vice President for Information Technology, that resulted in a dead link.

### **Functionality.**

*Guide for Technology Use and Technical Support.* There were few guides for the use of the primary technology for both institution orientations because the web pages, hyperlinks, videos, and web browser presentation applications are common technologies. One example provided by Institution One was the inclusion of a section of links to tutorials on how to use the Canvas system. Each institution also provided technical support. Institution One referenced technical support through the Office of the Vice President for Information Technology. The page included a “Get help” tab. By clicking on this tab students were given contact information to find help “24/7.” At Institution Two, two pages provided specific technical support. The Advising page included a notation for “Technical Assistance or Login Issues” with a phone number and email address. A hyperlink that stated “Need Technical Assistance? Contact the

[Institution] Service Desk” was found on the bottom of the Registration page. Clicking on the hyperlink auto-populated an email in an email client window.

**Usability.**

*Ease of Navigation.* Navigating through the primary orientation pages for Institution One was extremely easy. Links to the content areas were found on each orientation domain page, which allowed the student to navigate between content areas. At Institution Two, the orientation information pages that were linked on the orientation-landing page required the student to use the “back” button in their web browser. Navigation through the web page information was done through hyperlinks. These hyperlinks were technology generally understood which increased the ease of navigation. Navigation through the asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two was also easy because it was unidirectional. The student was only able to click the “Next” button. The only difficulty in navigate was at Institution One and was due to the use of different web templates. When the student was sent to a page that was using a different template students were required to use a different set of navigation tools to find the information they needed.

In summary, there was very little structure for either orientation program. The onus was placed upon the students to learn the material they felt would best apply to their needs. The instructor included very few mandates for interaction with the student. With the structure of the interface, the technology that was used for both orientation programs was traditional to web browsing. There was a heavy reliance on text, videos, and hyperlinks.

Table 3.

*Question 3 - Summary of Examples for Structure Tenet*

RQ3. To what extent do CCeOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure?

<b>Learning-Content: Flexibility</b>	
<i>Feedback Received</i>	Students receive feedback in two ways. Advisors reached out to students once they completed the SmarterMeasure assessment at Institution One. At Institution Two, students were immediately given a score for the quiz they took at the end of the asynchronous orientation. They were required to achieve an 80% or better.
<i>Feedback Mechanisms</i>	Students were prompted to provide feedback at Institution One about the advising they were receiving or about their technology support. They did this by emailing the corresponding offices or, for the technical support feedback, filling out an online form. They could also submit feedback through each institution's social media sites in addition to the email addresses that are present throughout the orientation program.
<i>Question Mechanisms</i>	Students were prompted throughout the orientation program to ask questions by sending an email to the address provided. During the orientation module at Institution One students were given the opportunity at the end of the presentation to ask questions directly to the instructor.
<i>Self-Paced</i>	Students were given the freedom during both orientation programs to learn at their own pace. There were no due dates provided aside from the date they selected to attend the synchronous orientation module for Institution One.
<i>Mechanisms for Change</i>	Students were not able to change the materials that were present during either orientation program. However, they were given the option to click on the supplemental materials in the order they wished. While this does not change the material information or the overall content of the programs, the mechanism of self-selection does change the course delivery
<i>Tailored Learning</i>	There were many examples of hyperlinked material in both orientation programs. This delivery method allowed the student to tailor their learning experience to their own need. In addition, during the synchronous orientation module at Institution One the students were told on multiple occasions to find more information on the web page. Students were expected to use the information they were given during orientation to complete tasks during their academic careers.
<i>Course Delivery Formats</i>	Text on web pages was the primary course delivery format for both institutions. Videos were interspersed throughout the programs but made up a small amount of educational material. In one case, the asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two, audio files were used. However, these files were only audio of the text materials being read by a narrator.
<i>Instruction Strategies</i>	Most examples for instructional strategies were unidirectional in the form of text, web pages, and materials. The Facebook page inferentially directed students to interact with one another which could be seen as an instructional strategy.
<i>Assessment</i>	The only direct assessment measure was the quiz for the asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two.

Table 3, continued

<b>Learning-Content: Formality</b>	
<i>Defined Objectives</i>	Both institutions provided basic objectives on the orientation landing pages. In addition, they also provided slides that presented basic topic objectives for the orientation modules.
<i>Rubric for Assessment</i>	Detailed instructions were provided for many of the requirements of the orientation for both institutions. These include verbal or written rubrics for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up the student account</li> <li>• How to prepare for courses</li> <li>• Process for choosing the pass/fail option</li> <li>• How to set the intent to graduate</li> <li>• How to make proctor arrangements</li> <li>• Steps to complete the online orientation</li> </ul>
<i>Guidelines for Communication</i>	The primary guideline for communication was the directive to communicate by email or telephone with the various departments if needed.
<i>Due Dates and Defined Schedule</i>	There were no related due dates for the orientation. All provided schedule information was for the institution.
<i>Policies</i>	Requirements, implicit and direct, were given to complete the steps of the orientation. This was done through numbered statements and direct quotes that stated the requirements.
<i>Expectations</i>	Students at Institution Two were given a requirement of achieving an 80% on the orientation module quiz before they could advance. There was an implied expectation that students would complete the orientation program.
<i>Curricular Guidelines</i>	Topic areas were provided in an ordered fashion on the landing page for each orientation program. In addition, videos for the LMS instruction for Institution One were broken into a scaffold learning approach
<b>Learning-Interface: Knowledge of Media Use</b>	
<i>Ease of Use and Common Technology</i>	Traditional technologies and easy to use navigation including play buttons, next buttons, and hyperlinks were present. In addition, the orientation modules for both institutions auto loaded for the student.
<b>Learning-Interface: Choice of Media Use</b>	
<i>Common Technology and Content Delivery</i>	Many traditional technology were used in the orientation including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperlinks</li> <li>• Web Templates</li> <li>• Web Pages</li> <li>• Adobe Connect</li> <li>• Dialogue text boxes</li> <li>• Videos (linked and imbedded)</li> <li>• YouTube</li> <li>• Social Media icons</li> </ul>
<b>Learning-Interface: Visualization</b>	
<i>Content Well Organized and Content Visually Appealing</i>	Pages included outlines for pages in the domain. Traditional technology, such as “Next” buttons, were used. There was no “Back” button present in the asynchronous orientation for Institution Two. A standard template was used for all Institution Two web pages. Web pages outside of the orientation domain for Institution One were built in different template styles.

Table 3, continued

<b>Learning-Interface: Functionality</b>	
<i>Guide for Technology Use and Technical Support</i>	Tutorials were provided for the Canvas system at Institution One. There were also many “Help” tabs and directives for pages, which direct students to technological support.
<b>Learning-Interface: Usability</b>	
<i>Ease of Navigation</i>	Links to content areas were easily found and easy to click on for both institutions. Traditional technology was used for navigation, such as play buttons for videos and web browser buttons. Institution Two did not maintain the orientation topic links on every orientation page making movement between topic areas difficult.

### Results for the Learner Autonomy Tenet

The fourth question for this study was: *to what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments take into account Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy?* The statements used in the instrument developed by Huang et al. (2015a) identified learner autonomy through the self-reported feelings of students. Since the examination of student perception was outside of the scope of this study, examples provided for the learner autonomy tenet were those in which the orientation program instructor created direct and indirect acknowledgments of learner autonomy. The factors for the learner autonomy tenet were divided into independence of learning and study habits. Examples are provided for the codes deconstructed from the statements used to identify these two factors. Table 4, at the end of this section, provides a summary of the findings for the learner autonomy tenet.

#### Independence of Learning

**Acknowledgments of New Learning.** Institution One highlighted both on the landing page for the orientation as well as during the synchronous orientation module that the online program was geared toward students returning to higher education or older students who had experience in the military or workforce. With this context, there were only two examples of acknowledging new learning. The first was during the beginning of the asynchronous orientation module. The instructor was prompted to say, “we are committed to helping you discover your passions, new ideas, and new perspectives” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). Later in the same orientation the instructor was prompted to state, “you should choose your Gen Ed courses by exploring course descriptions that you find interesting, compliment your area of study, or might be a topic that you have always wanted to know more about” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). These examples are indirect acknowledgements that students



should be prepared to learn new information about new topics and have new experiences. Institution Two acknowledged on the orientation-landing page that its online orientation was only intended for new students. The first paragraph on the page stated “we are glad you have decided to take online courses with us. New Student Online Orientation Sessions are for first time in college students planning to take ONLY online courses for the upcoming semester” (Institution Two Orientation Landing Page). Again, there was no direct acknowledgement that students must be ready to learn new information but implicitly these new students would have never learned about these orientation topics, therefore they should be ready to learn new information.

**Acknowledgments of Perseverance.** There were many examples of students being told directly or implicitly that they should seek help throughout their experience at both institutions. While this may imply to some extent that students should persevere, it did not rise to the level of offering acknowledgments of a challenge. The only statement that could be reflective of acknowledging the challenge of online learning was found on the Online Learning page for Institution One. In a section titled “How Prepared Are You for Online Learning?” the student was told, “you are intellectually capable of doing the work or you would not have been admitted to the university” (Institution One Online Learning Page). The inference was that the academic material would be challenging but they should persevere because they are capable.

**Acknowledgments of Learning Ownership.** The limited structure for dynamic communication and mandated feedback combined with the self-paced nature of both orientation programs implied that the onus for learning was almost entirely on the student. Both institutional orientation web pages included hyperlinks that were highlighted as additional information. Students were given the responsibility of increasing their own learning by clicking on the links. Another example of acknowledgment of learning ownership was on the Facebook pages for both institutions. Both pages included informational videos that described processes that supplemented the material on the orientation pages and were presented during the orientation modules.

However, the direct statements made during the synchronous orientation module at Institution One along with the information provided on the orientation web pages acknowledged a collaborative ownership for learning between the student and instructor. During the orientation module the instructor was prompted to tell the students to “take the initiative to access resources

and services to support you” as well as “when you take RESPONSIBILITY you become the architect of your experience” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). Later in the module the instructor was prompted to state, “but at the end of the day, you will be successful only if you put in the time and energy toward achieving your goals. You’re ultimately responsible for your education and what you learn” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script).

However, the synchronous orientation module for Institution One also tempered the student’s responsibility for learning by highlighting the support role the instructor and support staff have on the student’s learning. Students were told many times that their academic advisor was a partner in their learning. The script stated “your advisor is a point person who can direct you toward resources and services you might need, help you choose and schedule courses, and provide support as you progress through your degree” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). Additionally, the instructor was prompted to state, “one thing that we want you to know is that all of us here are here to ensure that you have every resource that you need to thrive” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). This was tangibly seen in the number of structured support staff provided to the student. In addition to the academic advisor, the student was also provided access to a Navigation coach and an uCoach account. Ultimately, the instructor for the orientation seemed to be trying to balance the responsibility for the student’s learning. It inferred a desire to challenge students to take the primary role in their learning while also acknowledging the support the instructional team would provide. A more explicit approach was taken when the instructors were prompted to state, “as we mentioned earlier, you are responsible for your academic decisions and choices. Your adviser will guide you, make suggestions, and help you analyze new life circumstances that might pop up, but ultimately, the decisions are yours” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script).

The asynchronous orientation module for Institution Two provided a similar balance. In the Academic Expectations video, the narrator stated, “if you want to have a good college experience, you will need to do your part. As a college student you have moved beyond the place where the instructor holds your hand and checks to see if you've done everything. You are finally in a place where you are expected to take responsibility for your own life and your own learning” (Institution Two Academic Expectations Video). However, later in the module during the video

titled “Best Start,” the narrator stated “whatever your goals are we are here to help you be successful” (Institution Two Best Start Video).

An example of the balance of learning ownership was also found on the orientation topic area web pages. At Institution One, the opening paragraph on the Student Responsibilities page stated:

It's important to understand your advisors and your role in the advising relationship. You are responsible for your academic decisions and choices. Your advisor will guide you, make suggestions, and help you analyze new life circumstances that might pop up, but ultimately, the decision are yours. More specifically your adviser's role is to help you understand your academic program, requirements, and advise you on any issues or concerns related to your major. Your adviser will help you explore opportunities for research, internships, and other types of engaged scholarship activities. And your adviser will be your advocate, cheerleader, support person, and sometimes the person who challenges your decisions with different perspectives.

As an advisee, you are responsible for asking for help when it's needed, being knowledgeable about your academic major and requirements, and taking the initiative in support services needed to advance your career. You should read your [Institution One] email daily, if not multiple times a day (Institution One Student Responsibilities Page).

However, the learning that occurred during the orientation web pages themselves was entirely up to the discretion of the student. On the New Student Assessment page at Institution One the student was told that the ALEKS assessment was suggested, therefore implying it was the student’s choice to learn from the program. Similarly, on the Courses page, students were given the recommendation to click on the hyperlinks for various topic areas under the header “Preparing for Your Courses.” Additionally, the Transferring Credits page recommended that students visit the Undergraduate Admission’s Transfer Course Evaluation Guide by clicking a hyperlink. Institution Two also provided an example. On the [Institution] Online Application page there was a statement with a hyperlink for students to “Find more information about the new meningitis requirement.”

## **Study Habits**

**Acknowledgements of Self-Direction.** There were few direct acknowledgments of self-direction in the orientation programs for either institution. The primary inferential

acknowledgment of self-direction was the nature of the orientation web pages. Students were given the opportunity to work through the orientation material based upon their personal motivation. Institution One directly mentioned the role of the support staff, including the academic advisor and coaches, but students were given the latitude to use these resources as they saw fit.

Direct examples of acknowledgement of self-direction occurred during the synchronous orientation module. The instructor was prompted to state “tests, quizzes, papers and projects may be due on a certain date but when you do the work for the class is up to you and your schedule” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script). One of the slides during the asynchronous orientation module for Institution Two also included, although more subtle, acknowledgment of self-direction. On a slide titled “Make a Plan: Online vs. Face-to-Face Courses” a list of statements about online courses were listed. The statements included “Must be very organized” and “Courses usually self-paced” (see Figure 10). These statements inferred that students were responsible for when they would get their work done.

**Acknowledgements of Meeting Deadlines.** There were very few deadlines required as part of either orientation program. Orientation pages for both institutions linked to the academic calendar of the institution and provided information about due dates for parts of the application process, but only one statement directly acknowledged meeting deadlines. During the synchronous orientation module at Institution One, the instructor discussed the uCoach application. Part of the uCoach application was the ability to set up reminders to meet deadlines. The instructor prompted students “the application will also send you reminders of important upcoming events and assist you in keeping in contact with your Navigation coach” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script).

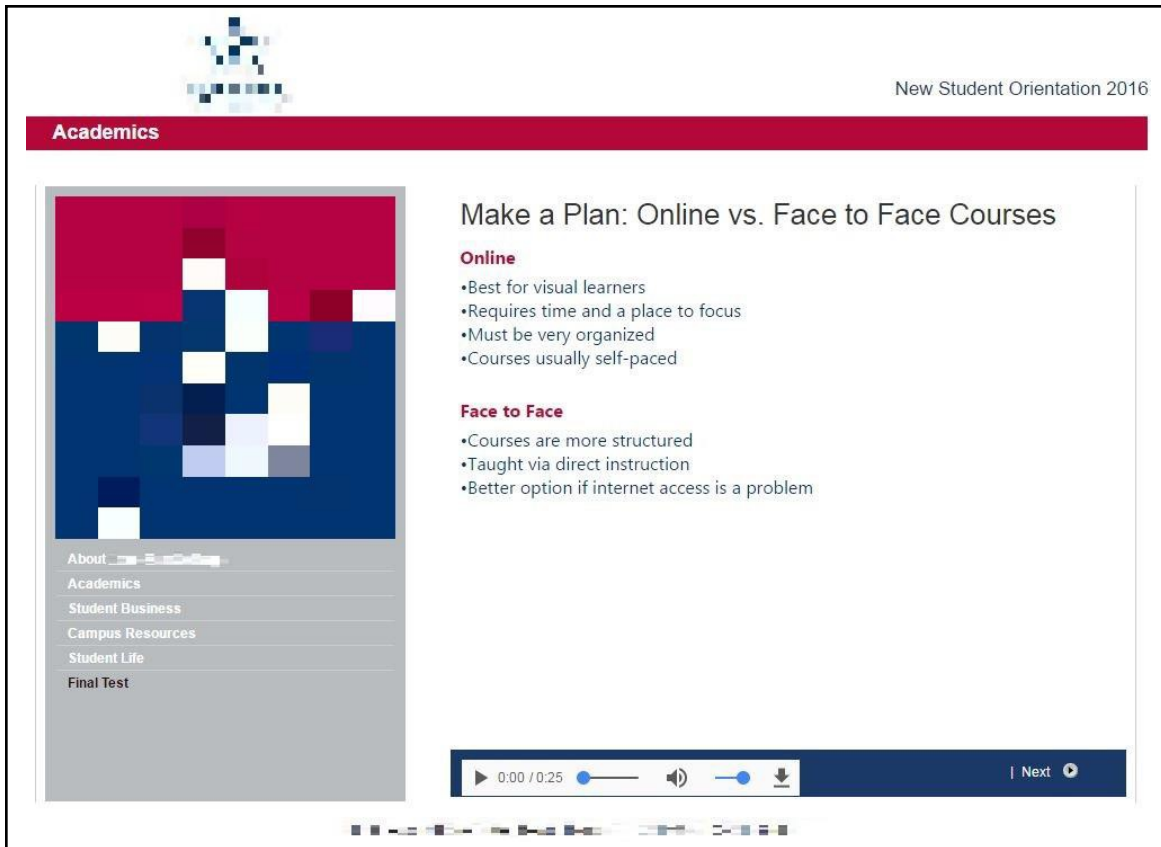


Figure 10. Asynchronous orientation slide for Institution Two.

**Acknowledgements of Time Management.** Both institutions dedicated significant time to discussing time management as a general concept as well as the importance of students' ability to manage their study time. There were significant discussions about time management during the orientation modules. During the orientation module at Institution One, the instructor discussed the SmarterMeasure assessment. The assessment measured time management skills, as well as other components of the student's life. The iStudy module was also discussed. It was stated that one of the primary components of the module was time management. The uCoach account was also meant to help "with a broad array of skills such as time management" (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). One of the polls presented by the instructor requested that the students identify how much time they intended to study. After the students had taken the poll, the instructor stated "you should plan to spend 9 to 12 hours per week of study and class work time for each 3 credit course you're taking [...] this means that if you intend to register for two courses you should prepare to spend 18-24 hours per week on these courses. Of course, some of them aren't going to take as much time but others might require

more” (Instructor One, Institution One Orientation Script). The orientation module for Institution Two dedicated an entire slide to time management. A chart was presented that outlines course loads from 6-15 credits and the corresponding amount of time a student should dedicate to studying (see Figure 11).

New Student Orientation 2016

**Academics**

### Make a Plan: Creating a Course Schedule

#### Course Load vs. Work Load

- Overloading work/school hours is the number one reason students do poorly, have to drop their classes, or find themselves on academic probation or suspension.
- You will need to plan two hours of study/homework time per credit hour taken.

Course Load	Recommended Study Time for Success	Recommended Work Hours per Week
6 Credit Hours	12 Hours	40 Hours or less
9 Credit Hours	18 Hours	30 Hours or less
12 Credit Hours	24 Hours	20 Hours or less
14-15 Credit Hours	28-30 Hours	10 Hours or less

Navigation: 0:00 / 1:02 | Next

Figure 11. Slide from asynchronous orientation module showing recommended study time.

There were a few examples of time management discussed on the orientation web pages. On the Online Learning page for Institution One, the third paragraph stated, “you’ll integrate class time with other work or family priorities” (Institution One Online Learning Page). The third paragraph stated, “successful online learners understand the time and discipline they’ll need in the online environment” (Institution One Online Learning Page). The eleventh paragraph stated “the average time an online student should plan to spend on 3-credit coursework is 9-12 hours per week. Some courses may vary in intensity and the hours of coursework change” (Institution One Online Learning Page). Finally, the twitter account for Institution One included an article on the main page titled “Time Management Experts Share Their Secrets for Staying Productive.”

Table 4.

*Question 4 - Summary of Examples for Learner Autonomy Tenet*

RQ3. To what extent do CCEOs created for student affairs departments take into account Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy?

<b>Independence of Learning</b>	
<i>Acknowledgments of New Learning</i>	The instructor at Institution One stated indirectly that the student was learning new ideas. Statements on the landing page for Institution Two implied that all students taking the orientation were new to the material.
<i>Acknowledgments of Perseverance</i>	Only a brief statement was present on an orientation web page for Institution One that implied that students must persevere.
<i>Acknowledgments of Learning Ownership</i>	<p>There were many examples of acknowledgments of learning ownership including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hyperlinks for additional information</li> <li>• Supplemental informational videos</li> <li>• Direct statements during orientations that placed the onus for learning on the student</li> <li>• Asynchronous orientation module at Institution Two</li> <li>• Self-guided learning through orientation programs</li> </ul> <p>There were also a number of direct statements during both orientation programs in which the instructor, primarily the academic advisor, was presented as a partner in the student’s learning.</p>
<b>Study Habits</b>	
<i>Acknowledgments of Self-Direction</i>	<p>The overall self-directed nature of the orientation programs inferred an acknowledgement of self-direction. However, there were direct statements throughout the orientation programs that acknowledged the students as responsible for the direction of their learning, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “tests, quizzes, papers and projects may be due on a certain date but when you do the work for the class is up to you and your schedule” (Instructor Two, Institution One Orientation Script).</li> <li>• “Must be very organized”</li> <li>• “Course usually self-paced”</li> </ul>
<i>Acknowledgments of Meeting Deadlines</i>	Links to the academic calendar and references to the uCoach program at Institution One were the only acknowledgments of meeting deadlines for either orientation program.
<i>Acknowledgments of Time Management</i>	<p>References to time management were made through the orientation program including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the SmarterMeasure assessment which measured time management skills.</li> <li>• polls conducted during the synchronous orientation program which asked about how much time students intended to study.</li> <li>• a slide for the orientation at Institution Two dedicated to recommended study time</li> </ul> <p>In addition, the web pages included direct statements about the need to balance life obligations with academic requirements.</p>

## Results Informing an Operational Definition

The fifth, and final, question for this study was: *what tangible examples of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory can inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs CCEOs?* This study both supports and negates components of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory and the research done by Huang et al. (2015a), which is useful for identifying key aspects of online CCEOs. The following observations are summative descriptions of the findings aligned with the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory and can be used to inform an operationalized definition for Student Affairs CCEOs:

- Each orientation program identified multiple instructors for the student. Each instructor could provide support about a specific content area.
- There were few mandated interaction points between instructor and student.
- There were no mandated interaction points among students.
- Specific learning outcomes were not present. Instead, a breadth of information was presented to the students and they were given the latitude to learn about the materials that were relevant to their personal needs.
- Rudimentary delivery methods were employed in both CCEOs.
- The only true individual learning assessment method employed in either CCEO was a quiz at the end of the asynchronous orientation program for Institution Two.
- A consistent high level of asynchronous learning was present in both orientation programs.

The findings in this chapter and statements provided above cannot create a definition for co-curricular educational opportunities in isolation. However, these findings can begin to inform a definition that may emerge from future research.

In summary, throughout this chapter I have presented examples of each deconstructed code based upon the orientation materials for both institutions included in this study. While the number of examples varied for each of the codes, enough was provided for each factor to ascertain the extent to which these orientation programs adhered to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory as well as provide examples to inform an operational definition for student affairs online CCEOs. It was clear that the traditional academic advisor played a large role in the examples of the Dialogue tenet but that it was the student's responsibility to



initiative most interaction. Also, unlike traditional academic courses, there were few examples of students interacting with their peers. Examples of the formal Structure were rare but those for flexible Structure were found throughout the orientation materials. Finally, examples of Learner Autonomy were mostly found directly tied to the implicit nature of the primarily asynchronous programs.

In chapter five I will review these findings in context of the research questions, compare them to previous research in an effort to begin the development of an operational definition of an online CCo, and provide concluding remarks.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In this study I examined the extent to which two online CCEOs adhered to the tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. To identify examples of tenet adherence, I used components of the instrument developed by Huang et al. (2015a), which was designed to analyze academic courses, to develop an *a priori* coding scheme. I then used this scheme to complete a content analysis of two online student affairs co-curricular educational opportunities. Findings from this content analysis were presented in Chapter 4.

In this chapter, I present a discussion of the findings in relation to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenets and the factors identified by Huang et al. (2015a) as explicative of Moore's theory. Discussion of transactional distance, as an isolated tenet, is presented first. I then discuss the findings for the three traditional tenets of Moore's Transactional Distance theory, namely dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. Next, I place the findings of this study within the context of prior research and theory. I then identify how these findings might impact practice, research, and policy. Subsequently, I examine the limitations of this study. Finally, I provide concluding remarks.

In this study, I focused on the tangible components of two co-curricular educational opportunities. While interviewing instructors or instructional designers was outside the scope of this study, in this chapter I make post hoc inferences about instructors' and designers' pedagogical motivations for including certain components within the online CCEOs. These inferences allowed me to make recommendations based on the findings of this study.

#### **Transactional Distance**

The first research question for this study concerned the extent to which CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory. The tenet of transactional distance as presented by Huang et al. (2015a) is rooted in both the connection between the learner and instructor, as well as between learners. The two online CCEOs in this study exhibited few examples of requirements for learners to connect with instructors. First, it was difficult to identify the instructor because each online CCEO was presented with a team approach to instruction. Second, generic contact information was provided for most of the instructors. Despite the fact that the academic advisor was identified as the online CCEO

instructor most likely to interact with the student, contact information was provided for support staff to educate students in almost all topic areas. The failure to identify a single instructor may limit a student's ability to connect to an individual, thereby increasing transactional distance.

The statements in the assessment used by Huang et al. (2015a) are focused on the connection to the academic course, in particular a small, connected learning community. For this investigation, the orientation developers seemed to be providing active and passive prompts, in the online orientation materials as well as the modules, focusing the student's attention on the connection to the greater institution. Students were rarely given an opportunity to build a community in the orientation programs themselves. Rather, the institutional community was highlighted through the availability of institution tours, supplemented by social media pages. In addition, the inclusion of multiple departments and the expectation that these departments would support students is another example of the focus on the connection to the whole institution rather than the individual unit. The statements provided by Huang et al. (2015a) imply that providing a community this large would increase transactional distance. However, if a student participating in a CCEO followed through with the opportunities to connect with the greater institution, as suggested by the instructor, transactional distance may be decreased.

The ways in which the orientation programs attempted to connect students to the institutional community are also worthy of comment. Through the narrative during the orientation modules and statements in the orientation materials, a familial tone was conveyed. Statements in the orientation identified the student as part of the institution's family and provided an expectation for personal relationships between the student and instructors. Neither Moore (1993), in his work on Transactional Distance, nor Huang et al. (2015a) specified whether personal, mentor, or academic relationships built between student and faculty lessened transactional distance. The personal relationships exemplified in these online orientation programs may demonstrate an attempt by the instructors of these online CCEOs to lessen transactional distance.

A multitude of contact points presented to the student, coupled with the statements directing students to build relationships, imply that interactions with instructors are possible. However, the onus is placed upon the student to initiate the relationships. The mere presence of available mechanisms for one-on-one conversations does not guarantee that these connections will be established. In many academic courses, the syllabus establishes the mechanism for

relationship building. For example, students may be required to interact with their instructors through email on a weekly basis or via a discussion thread on a message board. In contrast, however, with only two mandated interactions with an instructor for the orientation at Institution One, and only one interaction required at Institution Two, there may be a heightened likelihood of increasing the transactional distance due to limited structured interactions with an instructor. In these online CCEOs, the instructors created a program that required few mandated interactions with any instructor—and none between students.

Even though it was limited, there were opportunities for students to connect with instructors. Conversely, there were virtually no similar opportunities for students to build relationships with their peers, as evidenced by the fact that there was only one mandated connection point between learners in either orientation program. One reason for this deficit may be that current student affairs practitioners could be unaware of online practices or Web 2.0 technology that is available to enhance connections between students both synchronously and asynchronously. Indeed, the only technologies that were used to connect students directly (namely, Facebook and Adobe Connect) are two popular applications that have long been available to the general public. One reason for this may be that these educators were unaware of applications such as Edmodo, Storybird, or other Web 2.0 technologies. Another possible reason for the reduced relationship building between students could be that the instructors valued the asynchronicity of the orientation program as opposed to the connections that can be developed between students in real time. Whatever the reason for this instructional design decision, the lack of opportunity for students to build relationships with one another likely increases transactional distance.

### **Dialogue Tenet**

The second question for this study examined the extent to which CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhered to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of dialogue. Like the transactional distance tenet, the student disproportionately initiated the dialogue tenet. Specifically, the transactional distance tenet is focused on the ways instructors or peers make the student feel connected to the person or community. The dialogue tenet focuses on the tangible examples of interaction between the contributors in the orientation.

As discussed, the academic advisors served as the primary instructors in the orientation programs. They were required to engage in dialogue with the students for both orientation

programs, and were identified as the primary support agents for students throughout the orientation program. While these interactions would likely increase dialogue between the student and instructor, this connection was juxtaposed against an asynchronous backdrop in which there were many opportunities for dialogue—but few requirements. Therefore, the responsibility for managing the dialogue variable was left primarily to students.

One of the tangible ways that the online orientation programs increased the possibility for dialogue was by including common-use communication technologies. The most commonly used method was text-on-web templates, but even the Web 2.0 technology (e.g., Adobe Connect) was easily accessed. Interpersonal dialogue was most often manifested through email and telephone. The many instances of easy-to-use communication technology (compared to newer communication options) may have been tied to the requirement that the student, in most cases, had to initiate the contact.

In terms of communication in the orientation programs, the orientation module for Institution One was synchronous and the script required at least two presenters. This fact highlights an interesting aspect of dialogue in that there is a time component inherent in the dialogue tenet. The more required dialogue that is present, the more time the instructor must devote to the student directly. In the case of the orientation programs, for Institution One, the online component of a large research institution required the full-time engagement of two instructors with students during the orientation module. These modules took place multiple times per semester. In addition, the academic advisor was also required to contact the student. Institution Two, by contrast, only required the student to sign up for an advising session. The degree to which an institution opted to employ high levels of dialogue could have been an instructional design decision, or it could have been influenced by external variables, such as funding required to maintain high levels of staffing, among other reasons.

One surprising finding is the limited amount of required dialogue between students during the orientation module. Unlike their academic counterparts who traditionally employ small group assignments, message board threads, peer grading, or other mechanisms to increase the level of interaction between learners, the two online CCEOs featured only two examples of interaction between students. The synchronous orientation module at Institution One included an opportunity for students to interact at the end of the presentation—but these interactions were overshadowed by the primary purpose of that portion of the orientation, which was to answer

questions from students. In contrast, interactions between students seemed to be minimized. There were no structured prompts in the script to initiate these student interactions or requirements in the orientation information. There were also no prompts on the Facebook and Twitter accounts. In particular, the Facebook videos contained stories from the student perspective but did not focus on relationship building between students.

Traditional orientation programs place a high value on relationship building between students (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). One reason why these programs may not have placed a similar value on establishing these relationships could be tied to the belief that the asynchronous online component limits or negates the ability for students to build relationships. Additionally, one could speculate that the lack of knowledge by the student affairs staff members as to the many ways relationships can be cultivated in a digital community may have also hindered the inclusion of relationship building opportunities. As scholars have noted, there is a dearth of research about engaging students in online communities, and the level of education provided to future student affairs practitioners and scholars about these topics is inconsistent (Cabellon & Junco, 2015).

The online CCEOs in this study did provide examples of the dialogue tenet. However, scholars have argued that dialogue must remain high to lessen transactional distance (Huang et al., 2015a; Moore, 1993). This study has shown that there were limited mechanisms in place as part of these online CCEOs for dialogue between the student and instructor—and few if any requirements for students to interact with their peers. Overall, transactional distance would increase based upon these low levels of dialogue. Basic communication tools were provided and thus, mitigated some of the impacts of low levels of dialogue. However, according to Huang et al. (2015a), the student would require increased levels of learner autonomy for this to be achieved.

### **Structure Tenet**

The third question for this study examined the extent to which CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhered to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of structure. The structure tenet contains many subsets, but is first divided into Learner-Content and Learner-Interface components. This division marks the difference between the structure of the content and the technological interface components used to deliver the structural content. In more recent scholarship, the Learner-Content component has been delineated even further into flexibility (a

hallmark of Moore's first definition of the structure tenet), and formality, which represents a recent addition to the theory of Transactional Distance (Huang et al., 2015a).

### **Learner-Content**

**Flexibility.** The lack of a structured syllabus with a curricular outline of a course's topic areas limits the contextual applicability of structure for the online CCEOs included in this study. While there were examples for each of the deconstructed codes, they were present in isolation with no articulated connection. In online academic courses, the syllabus is the guide for the course. Whether through policy, expectations, or a schedule, the syllabus is meant to provide structure and direction to the student. One reason for the lack of structured context for the orientation material may be the designer's failure to see their work through the perspective of the learner. No matter the reason, the lack of an orientation syllabus or guidelines gave rise to definitional ambiguity for terms such as feedback, policy, and expectations. In an academic course, the student would generally receive feedback on assignments. Since there was only one example of grades provided in the two online CCEOs, and almost all of the material was optional, students were essentially selecting the material they deemed necessary for their own learning. This made the orientation programs extremely flexible, but not necessarily in the academic context that Moore (1993) intended in his original definition.

When Moore (1993) discussed flexibility, it was in the context of co-created learning where small changes are made to the instructional materials based upon individualized learning styles. On the contrary, these orientation programs allowed for wholesale deviations, whereby orientation learning outcomes could look starkly different between two students. The students were required to participate in the mandatory orientation modules but could also choose to click every link, read all material, watch all videos, and speak with all support staff for each program to gain enhanced insight into the plethora of topic areas. The material presented in the online CCEOs constituted a broad swath of content areas that may or may not have been applicable to each student. One example of this variability would be information about student loans, which would be irrelevant to some students on full scholarship or with sufficient financial resources. The orientation instructor was required to make assumptions about all possible needs of every student and ensure that the materials they needed were available. Students were then required to pick and choose the information they believed to be relevant. This degree of flexibility could

cause students to be confused about which materials were applicable to them, especially students new to a higher education institution (Huang et al., 2015a).

**Formality.** The formality factor is based upon the premise that all academic expectations will be clearly laid out by the instructor. In an academic course, expectations would generally be gleaned through information provided in a syllabus. In contrast, at no point in the orientation programs examined herein were clearly identified learning outcomes presented to the students. The closest articulations of outcomes were lists of content areas. The lack of anything resembling a syllabus, assignments, structure to complete each assignments, policies, or protocol for class expectations beyond a checklist of steps, made it difficult to identify examples of formality. The lack of a basic syllabus or clearly defined learning outcomes represented the most significant gap in adherence to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory and resulted in a dearth of examples for the formality component of the structure tenet.

### **Learner – Interface**

There were many examples of a common technology used in the orientation programs. The basic technology was enhanced by the use of straightforward webpage templates. The navigation strategies evidenced in this investigation would be simple to most users who had a rudimentary understanding of the Internet and basic computer knowledge. The only example of inconsistency in the web template was at Institution One. Once the user left the orientation domain, the webpage template changed. Moreover, some of the pages were difficult to navigate and others redirected to dead links.

During the orientation for Institution One, students were presented with video tutorials for the Learning Management System used for academic courses. In contrast, similar tutorials were not provided to navigate either CCeO which seems to reveal a lack of perceived need by the instructor to educate the students on the use of rudimentary technology. Research done by Huang et al. (2015a) has shown that increasing the ease of use of the technology of a course has an impact of lessening the transactional distance. It may be that co-curricular orientation programs built with basic technology inherently decrease transactional distance.

The lack of a syllabus limited the extent to which the CCeOs adhered to the structure tenet. The programs were created to be almost absolutely asynchronous. There were no examples of the student and instructor synchronously co-creating learning (e.g. student requesting that the instructor provide additional materials on a particular subject). While



theoretically mitigated somewhat by the basic interface used in the CCEOs (Huang et al., 2015a), the limited presence of structure would increase transactional distance.

### **Learner Autonomy Tenet**

The fourth question in this study was designed to determine the extent to which CCEOs created for student affairs departments adhere to Moore's Transactional Distance Theory tenet of learner autonomy. Despite the fact that learner autonomy is the least-studied tenet of Moore's Transactional Distance theory (Huang et. al., 2015b), for this investigation it proved to be one of the most interesting. It must be noted, however, that in this study it was not the student's feeling of autonomy that was being studied; rather, I looked for examples of the deconstructed codes in the orientation program. The two factors for the Learner Autonomy tenet as defined by Huang et al. (2015a) were study habits and independence of learning.

#### **Study Habits**

While small in absolute terms, a surprising number of examples aligned with the codes within the study habits factor. In particular, the orientation programs provided thirteen examples of acknowledgments of time management. Examples such as the ones found in the online orientation programs (e.g., of prompts about time management) are shown in the study by Huang et al. (2015a) to have a net impact of shrinking transactional distance.

#### **Independence of Learning**

Asynchronous online learning inherently requires the student to take some ownership of their learning. Nonetheless, instructors can exude a significant level of control even in an asynchronous environment. In the orientation CCEOs examined in this study, Institution One used a synchronous orientation module to control information. As has been discussed, in this study, learning outcomes were not provided to guide the student. While topic areas were listed, students were given a tremendous amount of control over the topics they would examine.

Both orientation CCEOs implied the need for a high level of learner autonomy through the almost absolutely asynchronous nature of the program. This suggests that either all students interfacing with the programs would possess high levels of autonomy, mitigating any negative impact of low levels of dialogue or structure. Statements on the orientation pages for Institution One acknowledged that most of the students taking online courses at the institution were older students who were returning to higher education from the workforce. At Institution Two, the orientation landing page noted that students were attending the community college as first-time

students. Researchers have found that online non-traditionally aged college students need control over when they learn than their traditionally aged counterparts (Cercone, 2008). However, Institution One employed a synchronous orientation module, while Institution Two (a community college serving more traditionally aged students) was entirely asynchronous. This dissonance between practice and theory may reveal that the instructors for these orientation CCEOs did not view their work in isolation. Instructors at Institution Two may have assumed that the learning that occurred during the orientation CCEO would be built upon by other student affairs educators.

Primarily during the synchronous orientation module at Institution One, but prevalent throughout the orientation materials at both institutions, the instructor made multiple references to the role they had in the student's success. While instructors placed the primary responsibility on students for their own learning, they appeared to take their role seriously. Statements in the online orientation programs clearly articulated to the student that the instructors (and primarily the academic advisor) had a degree of responsibility in ensuring their success. At times the instructor seemed to be implying that the support staff would do anything required to mitigate the student's failure, and in fact would go to any lengths necessary to teach the student the components of orientation that were needed. This was the only example of a decrease in required learner autonomy by the student. The student would need less autonomy if the instructor followed through with their implication of absolute support and limiting student failure.

The learner autonomy tenet is important because, according to Moore (1993), a student can overcome the negative impacts of low levels of dialogue and/or structure by exercising high levels of autonomy. The online CCEOs in this study contained many examples of the codes for learner autonomy deconstructed from statements included in the study by Huang et al. (2015a). This implies that the structure of the CCEOs included an expected capacity for learners to engage with the content autonomously. If true, this capacity suggests that learners could overcome many of the prior findings pertaining to low levels of dialogue and structure in the CCEOs in this study. However, learners who use these CCEOs may or may not have the capacity to engage with the content autonomously.

## **Operational Definition**

Findings from this study both reinforce and contradict prior research about student connection, learning outcomes, access to instructors, and learner autonomy. Examining the relationship between this study and prior research illuminated several key insights about online CCEOs in student affairs. These insights may begin to frame the components of a student affairs online co-curricular educational opportunity. A study of two online orientation programs cannot result in an absolute definition. However, future researchers may build upon these findings to identify a fully formed operational definition for an online CCEO.

The high value placed upon student connection in prior higher education and student affairs research may not be present in online CCEOs. Also, presenting desired learning outcomes and a rigid schedule may not maintain the same import in student affairs online CCEOs that it has in traditional courses. Student access to many instructors—rather than just one—may be important to the online CCEO model in student affairs. Finally, greater learner autonomy in CCEOs may need to be assumed for all students, given the rudimentary delivery methods and lack of required assessment measures. These insights offer the beginnings of an operational definition for online CCEOs in student affairs.

## **Relationship of the Findings to Prior Research**

No studies were identified in which researchers examined online co-curricular educational opportunities using tenets of an online instructional design theory. However, there is a great deal of literature in which scholars have used Moore's Transactional Distance Theory to examine educational opportunities, namely online academic courses. My findings create the first known link between the practice of online co-curricular education and transactional distance theory.

In prior transactional distance studies, the structure tenet is foundationally tied to the assumed existence of a curricular outline and expectations for an academic course, which are traditionally present in a syllabus (Huang et al., 2015a). The definitions of the flexibility and formality factors require a starting position from which the student can request deviation (Moore, 1993; Huang et al., 2015a). This approach is most directly reflected in the statements employed in the study by Huang et al. (2015a), which ask whether a detailed syllabus is provided because of the assumption of its presence. In other studies, a similar assumption is made and researchers

focus their examination of adherence to Moore's theory based upon on any deviations the student can request to the syllabus (Bischoff et al., 1996). In this study, I found that CCEOs may not have similar examples of directly stated curricular components. Some aspects of a curriculum may be present, but the programs in this study placed the onus upon the student to choose their educational pathway.

In addition, many researchers have identified high levels of structure throughout a given course as influencing levels of transactional distance (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004). The orientation programs in this study maintained low levels of mandated structure. However, the material for each topic area was presented in a structured way. Therefore, if students autonomously decided to engage with the material, they would interact with a structured approach. The idea of students maintaining such high levels of control over their learning does not appear in Transactional Distance Theory research. For instance, Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) examined six examples of traditional online education and in each case the instructor created the requirements for students to achieve a set of learning outcomes. In this study, however, the learning outcomes were never directly stated and the broad nature of the material implied that the outcomes were determined by individual student needs.

The learner's relationship with the interface is another important component of the structure tenet. Researchers present the Web 2.0 environment as a structured way to enhance the online learning environment and shrink transactional distance (Saba, 2005). However, not all students who know how to use Web 2.0 technologies for social and entertainment purposes can leverage the same technology for learning (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009). Knowledge of media use, choice of media, visualization, functionality, and usability represent only a few of the technology interface factors that can influence transactional distance (Huang et al., 2015a). In this study, few Web 2.0 environments were used in lieu of the Web 1.0 technologies. According to transactional distance theory researchers (Huang et. al., 2015a), use of Web 2.0 technologies would increase structure and lower transactional distance for the student.

Researchers in distance education advocate discussions between peers on digital message boards or through group work at a distance as mechanisms for decreasing transactional distance (Saks, 2009). In this study, opportunities for students to connect with instructors were present. Multiple communication channels, such as email, phone, and online chats, were present in the CCEOs. Students were asked to view the instructor in a familial context and were prompted to

connect with the institution rather than the orientation CCEOs. However, opportunities for students to interact in the orientation CCEOs in this study were perfunctory. The dialogue between peers is identified by Moore (1993) as an important component to students achieving learning outcomes in a distance learning environment. Thus, one area in which this study diverges from prior research pertains to the learner-learner factor.

Additionally, prior research suggests students need opportunities for learner autonomy to offset low levels of dialogue or structure and to decrease transactional distance (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009; Huang et al., 2015a). While few researchers have attempted to study the learner autonomy tenet, Huang et al. (2015a) found that “independence of learning” and “study habits” were factors that affected learner autonomy. The findings of prior research resonates with results of this study. In the two CCEOs in this study students were granted great latitude in directing their own learning, which could result in offsetting low levels of structure and dialogue.

Researchers in the field of transactional distance have indicated that transactional distance is based upon the correlative interplay between the tenets of dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (Moore, 1993; Huang et al., 2015a). Moreover, shrinking transactional distance positively impacts the efficacy of the online educational environment (Stein et al., 2005). In addition, high levels of dialogue and structure are effective in lessening transactional distance and low levels of dialogue and structure increase transactional distance (Huang et al., 2015a). Additionally, learner autonomy can lessen high transactional distance (Benson & Samarawickrema, 2009). In this study, a great deal of responsibility was placed upon the autonomy of the student to reduce transactional distance. Opportunities for dialogue and the ability for the student to be engaged with structural materials were all present. However, high levels of dialogue and structure were predicated upon a consistent requirement that all students maintain high levels of learner autonomy.

### **Implications for Future Practice, Research and Policy**

Findings from this study offer implications for future research. First, while there are many researchers using Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory, findings from this investigation revealed new avenues in which to use the theory. For example, this study was one of the first to use a distance education theory to examine online CCEOs. This study provides a guide for using Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory to examine additional online co-curricular educational

opportunities. Future scholars could use this guide to study additional types of CCEOs to increase the utility of Moore's theory in student affairs research.

This study used content analysis, a qualitative methodology, to confirm the existence of two online programs in student affairs that incorporated components of Moore's Transactional Distance theory. Future researchers could use quantitative research methods, such as the ones used in the study by Huang et al. (2015a), to analyze learning outcomes in online CCEOs. By doing so, they could compare the learning impact of shrinking transactional distance in an academic course to similar learning metrics in a CCEO. In addition, future qualitative studies could include interview or focus group data from students and/or instructors to triangulate the findings of this content analysis.

This study was limited in scope due to the vast amount of data available for analysis from only two online orientation programs. Researchers may want to employ a team approach when conducting future exploratory studies. A research team may have capacity to examine a comprehensive set of examples for CCEOs expanding upon the findings in this study.

Moore's Transactional Distance theory is not the only pedagogical theory used in instructional design for online courses. Future researchers may want to conduct a similar study using a different theory, such as the Quality Matters rubric (Britto, Ford, & Wise, 2013), to discover the extent to which CCEOs adhere to additional distance theories. Such an approach could broaden the array of theories that developers of online CCEOs could use to inform their practices.

Although the impact of this study on practice could be enhanced by future research, findings from this study offer important implications for practice. The results of this study have shown that two online CCEOs do have examples of the components of Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, similar to online courses. Administrators responsible for the support of students at a distance should analyze their CCEOs not merely from a programmatic perspective, but instead within the learning paradigm (Keeling, 2006). Online pedagogical theories such as Moore's Transactional Distance Theory could then be used to assess and enhance the efficacy of the program.

In addition, findings of this study demonstrated a lack of clearly articulated learning outcomes, which highlights a potential shortcoming for designers of online CCEOs. Providing clear, simple outcome definitions may enhance the positive impact of the asynchronous nature of

online CCEOs. Furthermore, designers of online CCEOs must acknowledge that not all students will display the same level of learner autonomy. Either program developers must design the program to fit the student, e.g. traditionally aged, non-traditionally aged, first-generation student, or the student must fully understand the likely level of required autonomy needed to progress successfully through the online CCEO.

Finally, this study also provides implications for institutional policy, specifically with respect to the resources provided to these programs. While the scope of this study did not include the examination of resources provided to the orientation designers, the findings do imply areas of need. The following are suggestions are presented to address these implied shortcomings. It appears that student affairs practitioners are not being educated about all available new technologies that have the potential to decrease transactional distance in the CCEOs they are creating. Administrators may want to provide direct education to student affairs professionals about technologies used to educate students online. Finally, administrators may want to examine the ways in which instructional designers, currently leveraged to support academic faculty, can also enhance the efficacy of student affairs personnel.

### **Limitations**

All studies have limitations, and this study was no exception. First, this study included only two orientation programs. The scope of this study was limited by the large quantity of materials included in the online orientation programs and corresponding data to be analyzed. A larger sample of orientation programs may have generated different findings. Further, given that orientation programs are geared toward easing students' academic transition to college (Barefoot, 2005), components of orientation programs not seen in other student affairs functional areas may have given rise to an over-exaggerated adherence to one of Moore's tenets. For instance, there were many examples of the deconstructed code "acknowledgments of time management" found in this study. Other programs such as a career services CCEO may not have time management as a central learning outcome.

Second, this study was based upon recent research conducted by Huang et al. (2015a) that identified the components of transactional distance. While their findings are statistically valid, there has not been sufficient time for additional researchers to use and assess the validity of the components found in the instrument. Therefore, if future studies invalidate the instrument

developed by Huang et al. (2015a), findings from this study may need to be revisited in light of revisions to the instrument.

Finally, as with all studies, these findings could have been influenced by researcher bias. For example, my experience with co-curricular educational opportunities could have predisposed me to create the deconstructed codes and find examples of those codes in a way that would have been different for another researcher. However, I took several efforts to mitigate this limitation. These included developing the coding scheme based upon prior research; providing thick, rich description of the findings; offering the coordinators of the orientation programs the opportunity to examine my findings for their institution; and using an audit trail.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, this study adds to the research on Moore's Transactional Distance theory and begins a scholarly discussion about the use of the theory in student affairs practice. Findings from this investigation reveal the existence of two online CCEOs created by or for student affairs educators that adhere in significant, although limited, ways to a pedagogical theory traditionally used in online course design. Student affairs educators could begin an entirely new conversation about the use of theories in their practices to enhance student learning outcomes, particularly in increasingly common online settings. Findings from this study may also encourage instructional designers to expand their efforts to improve the teaching and learning environment beyond educational course design for faculty members.

As future researchers examine more CCEOs based on available pedagogical theories, new theories and/or research may emerge that provide context for differences and similarities between pedagogical approaches in academic and student affairs. This study may contribute to this emerging area by identifying initial components of an operationalized definition for the development of CCEOs in student affairs.

Technology is ubiquitous in higher education. As student affairs educators continue to embrace technological development, new theories must be borrowed from distance education fields to inform effective practice. My hope is that this study can begin a conversation about how student affairs educators and scholars can use theories like Moore's Transactional Distance Theory to increase learning efficacy for students participating in online co-curricular educational opportunities.



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## APPENDIX A

		DIALOGUE			
<b>Tangible Criteria</b>					
Deconstructed Codes	Possible Examples	Description of Example 1	Description of Example 2	Description of Example 3	Description of Example 4
<i>Learner-Instructor</i>					
	Student prompted to ask questions after each module; Each module identifies staff member who will contact them				
Recurring Contact					
Types of Communication Technology	Powerpoint presentations; video presentation; text information				
Real Time Communication	Chat option for student available; Contact Us tab				
Dynamic Communication	Contact information provided with instructions to contact for more information; Chat option for student available				
<i>Learner-Learner</i>					
	New student facebook page linked; Hashtag presented for social media use				
Recurring Contact					
Types of Communication Technology	Facebook page linked; twitter account presented; Contact Us tab				
Real Time Communication	Chat option for student available; Contact Us tab				
Relationship Building	Video discusses ways to be involved; Links presented for student groups; New student facebook page linked				

## APPENDIX B

		Structure			
Tangible Criteria					
Learner-Content					
Deconstructed Codes	Possible Examples	Description of Example 1	Description of Example 2	Description of Example 3	Description of Example 4
<i>Flexibility</i>					
Feedback Received	Written statement identifying when the student would receive feedback; Video narration includes a statement about talking with advisor about course scheduling and receiving feedback on future courses; Presence of outline of steps to receive feedback on plan of study				
Feedback Mechanisms	Link to facebook page for new students; Link to twitter account for orientation; Link to academic advisor email				
Question Mechanisms	Link to facebook page for new students; Link to twitter account for orientation; Link to academic advisor email				
Self-Pace	No time limit present; System allows user to exit and return; System allows user to save progress				
Mechanisms for Change	Assessment includes option for feedback; User is given option to investigate ideas in as much detail as they wish; User can choose the modules with which they interact				
Tailored Learning	Opening screen states students name and information; Student given option to learn more about topic by clicking on link				
Course Delivery Formats	Text information present; Videos present; Audio narration present				
Instruction Strategies	User encouraged to go to facebook and interact with other student; User prompted to materials to learn on their own; User prompted to reach out to academic advisor to go over course schedule				
Assessment	Assessment at the end of each module; User prompted to talk with academic advisor about courses they signed up for; Check list provided at end of module				
<i>Formality</i>					
Defined Objectives	Introduction page presents learning objectives; Information page discusses learning objectives for the topic				
Rubric for Assignments	Checklist provided at the end of module; "How To" provided for applying for financial aid				
Guidelines for Communication	Contacts tab provided; Twitter link provided; Facebook link provided				
Due Dates	Dates provided for Financial Aid; University calendar linked				
Defined Schedule	Opening page of orientation tells user to finish before the first class; Video narrator tells student to go at their own pace				
Policies	Opening page states that finishing online orientation is required; Checklist provided of all required activities				
Expectations	Module assessments state a requirement of 90% of questions answered correctly to move on				

Curricular Learning	Knowledge from one slide is needed for the next				
Learner-Content					
Knowledge of Media Use	Easy to start videos; Hyperlinked emails present				
Ease of Use	Hyperlinked Orientation Guide available on every page; "Next" button clearly visible; Videos play with one click				
Common Technology	Imbedded video; hyperlinks; Tabs clearly labeled				
Choice of Media Use					
Common Technology	Imbedded video; hyperlinks; Tabs clearly labeled				
Content Delivery Methods	Videos give information; Text information; powerpoints provided				
Visualisation					
Content Well Organized	All visual material fits on the screen				
Content Visually Appealing	Multiple types of media present; Standard fonts present				
Functionality					
Guide for Technology Use	Opening page explained to the student how to navigate pages; Play button clearly visible on video				
Technical Support	Help Tab present; Phone number and email provided for technical support				
Usability					
Ease of Navigation	Hyperlinked Orientation Guide available on every page; "Next" button clearly visible; Videos play with one click				

## APPENDIX C

		Learner Autonomy			
Tangible Criteria					
Deconstructed Codes	Possible Examples	Description of Example 1	Description of Example 2	Description of Example 3	Description of Example 4
<i>Independence of Learning</i>					
<i>Acknowledgments of New Learning</i>	Narrator welcomes student to their first semester				
<i>Acknowledgments of Perseverance</i>	Narrator mentions perseverance				
<i>Acknowledgments of Learning Ownership</i>	Opening of Orientation places onus on student to achieve completion; Video narrator talks about personal responsibility				
<i>Study Habits</i>					
<i>Acknowledgements of Self-Direction</i>	Narrator talk about self-direction for learning; Academic support information is presented with the student as responsible for meeting setup				
<i>Acknowledgements of Meeting Deadlines</i>	Deadlines are presented for setting up meeting with advisor; Deadline presented for financial aid				
<i>Acknowledgements of Time Management</i>	Narrator mentions need for time management; Academic support information mentions time management presentation				

## APPENDIX D

		Transactional Distance			
<b>Tangible Criteria</b>					
<b>Learner-Content</b>					
<i>Learner-Instructor Transactional Distance</i>					
Community Component to Course	Facebook page for new students; Video narrator mentions number of new online students; Materials provided to join organizations				
Connection to Instructor Component	Real Time Chat presented; Modules identify staff who will contact them				
Instructor Presence	Real Time Chat presented; Student encouraged to call if help is needed				
<i>Learner-Learner Transactional Distance</i>					
Connection to Peers Component	Facebook page; Peer Mentors mentioned in video				
Peer Presence	Facebook page for new student; Hashtag for new students provided				
Isolation	No peer contact; No information provided for staff				



## APPENDIX E

Statement Extraction	Deconstructed Codes
I communicate with my instructor on course-related issues at least once a week	Recurring Contact
I communicate with my instructor through multiple communication channels (e.g. emails, phone, discussion board and online chat)	Types of Communication
I have opportunities to communicate with my instructor real time in this online class	Real Time Communication
Communication between me and the instructor in this online class is a dynamic two-way communication	Dynamic Communication
I actively engage in dialogues with my instructor to construct and share knowledge	Dynamic Communication
My communication with the instructor in this online class is intensive	Dynamic Communication
My communication with the instructor in this course is constructive/helpful in achieving learning objectives	Dynamic Communication
My communication with the instructor in this online class is something I look forward to	N/A
I value my communication with the instructor on course-related issues	N/A
The instructor values my input in our communication	Dynamic Communication
I communicate with my fellow students on course-related issues at least once a week	Recurring Contact
I communicate with my fellow students through multiple communication channels (e.g. email, phone, discussion board and online chat)	Types of Communication
I have opportunities to communicate with my fellow students real time in this online class	Real Time Communication
Communication between me and other students in this online class is a dynamic two-way communication	Dynamic Communication
I actively engage in dialogues with other students to construct and share knowledge	Dynamic Communication
My communication with other students in this online class is intensive.	Dynamic Communication
My communication with other students in this course is constructive/helpful in achieving learning objectives	Dynamic Communication
My communication with other students in this online class is something I look forward to	N/A

I value my communication with other students on course-related issues	N/A
I believe that other students value my input in our communication	Dynamic Communication
I receive individualized feedback on my assignments, projects or other required course tasks	Feedback Received
The course is structured in a way that provides me ample opportunities to ask questions and receive useful feedback	Feedback Mechanism/Question Mechanism
The course is structured in a way that enables me to work at my own pace to meet the course goals and objectives	Self-Paced
The course is structured in a way that encourages me to negotiate with the instructor on the learning objectives, activities, evaluation and technology use for this online course	Mechanism for Change
The course is tailored to my learning needs that enable me to apply my learning to real-world experiences	Tailored Learning
The course is structured in a way that my difficulties during the learning process (e.g. unexpected problems) are accommodated	Tailored Learning
The course is structured in a way that enables me to incorporate my previous experience into the course	Tailored Learning
I am challenged to achieve to the best of my abilities through instructor focus on individualized instruction and additional recourses for advanced learning	Tailored Learning
The course is structured in a way that the instructor uses our feedback to modify course material to better meet our learning needs	Mechanism for Change
The course is structured in a way that encourages me to make my learning needs clear	Mechanism for Change
The course content is presented using multiple formats, such as text, audio and video	Course Delivery Formats
A variety of instructor strategies (e.g. discussion, reflection, demonstration, group work and case study) are used in this course to meet our learning needs	Instruction Strategies
The course is structured in a way that multiple methods (e.g. assignments, discussion participation, projects and exams) are used to assess my class performance	Assessment
The course provides both one-way and two-way communication channels for me to connect to my instructor and fellow students	Dynamic Communication

I have been given ample opportunities to practice before the final assessment of my performance	N/A
A detailed syllabus with clearly defined course objectives and schedule of content is provided at the beginning of the semester for this online course	Defined Objectives
Clear guidelines/rubrics on assignments, projects or other course-related tasks are provided for this online course	Rubrics for Assignments
Clear guidelines regarding the desired quantity/quality of communications in this online course are provided	Guidelines for Communication
Specific due dates for assignments and other course-related tasks are set for this online course	Defined Schedule
A detailed course schedule/calendar is provided for this online course	Defined Schedule
A detailed course policy (e.g. late submission, missed tests and online discussion behaviors) is provided for this online course	Policies
Course expectations are clearly laid out at the beginning of the semester	Expectations
Course content is organized in manageable segments (e.g. distinct learning modules)	Curricular Learning
I am comfortable working with the course delivery system (e.g. Blackboard) and other technologies required for this course	Ease of Use
I understand how to effectively use the technologies required for this online class.	Common Technology
I have the necessary knowledge and skills to use the technologies required for this online class	Common Technology
I have the freedom to choose the technologies I feel comfortable using to communicate with my instructor and fellow students	Common Technology
A variety of delivery media (e.g. broadcast audio or video, 2-way video and DVD) are used in this course	Content Delivery Methods
I have been given ample opportunities to practice the technologies before I am required to use them for course activities	Common Technology
The course content is spatially and visually well organized	Content Well Organized
The course site is attractive and visually appealing	Content Visually Appealing

The instructor provides resources or tutorials/links to tutorials on technologies used in this online class	Guide for Technology Use
The instructor provides technical support information in case we encounter technical problems for this online class	Technical Support
It is easy to navigate the course site to look for the information that I need	Ease of Navigation
I often get lost looking for the information in the course site	Ease of Navigation
I enjoy new learning experiences	Acknowledgements of New Learning
Even when tasks are difficult, I try to stick with them	Acknowledgements of Perseverance
I enjoy finding information about new topics on my own	Acknowledgements of New Learning
I am open to new ways of doing familiar things	Acknowledgements of New Learning
I take responsibility for my learning experiences	Acknowledgements of Learning Ownership
I enjoy being given a challenge	Acknowledgements of Perseverance
I frequently find excuse for not getting down to work	Acknowledgements of Self-Direction
I plan my time for study effectively	Acknowledgements of Meeting Deadlines
I am good at meeting deadlines	Acknowledgements of Meeting Deadlines
My time management is good	Acknowledgements of Time Management
I feel a strong sense of belonging to this online course	Community Component to Course
I feel this online class is a cohesive learning community	Community Component to Course
I feel a strong sense of belonging to a cohesive learning community in this online course	Community Component to Course
I feel closely connected to my instructor in this online course	Connection to Instructor
I feel a strong sense of 'being with' my instructor during my learning process	Connection to Instructor

I feel the presence of my instructor in this online course, despite the physical distance between us	Instructor Presence
I feel a strong rapport with my instructor in this online course	Connection to Instructor
I feel a sense of isolation from my instructor in this online course	Instructor Presence
I feel I have a shared understanding of the course goals with my instructor	N/A
I feel I have a shared understanding of the course content with my instructor	N/A
I feel I have a shared understanding of the course activities with my instructor	N/A
I feel I have a shared understanding of the assessment methods of my learning with my instructor	N/A
I feel my learning expectations have been met in this online course	N/A
I feel I have learned a great deal in this online course	N/A
I feel closely connected to my fellow students in this online course	Connection to Peers
I feel a strong sense of 'being with' my fellow students during my learning process	Connection to Peers
I feel the presence of my fellow students in this online course, despite the physical distance between us	Peer Presence
I feel a strong rapport with my fellow students in this online course	Connection to Peers
I feel a sense of isolation from my fellow students in this online course	Isolation
I feel students in this online class have a shared understanding of each other's learning experiences	Connection to Peers