MAXIMIZING ONLINE INSTRUCTIONAL PEDAGOGY IN TEACHER EDUCATION COURSES FOR CAREER CHANGERS

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ABSTRACT

In the past 20 years there has been a dramatic increase in adults desiring to change careers, and a great number of these adults are transitioning to careers in teaching. To meet the needs of these adult learners, there is an increasing desire and need for online learning, particularly for the adult learner who continues to work full time while pursuing a teaching license. Recognizing that institutions of higher education—particularly private institutions—do not have limitless fiscal and human resources, there is a need to appropriately invest in instructor resources in order to provide the most effective and efficient learning environment for career changers. This current study surveyed career changers in a College of Education at a Midwestern institution on the behaviors of course instructors they value most and value least in the online learning atmosphere. The career changers noted that they highly value effective communication, feedback, and a positive disposition from online course instructors. Recognizing that career changers valued these three behaviors the most, universities need to inform faculty about the importance of ongoing communication, providing meaningful feedback, and designing explicit strategies to provide encouragement within the online learning management system. Career changers have many options for online teacher preparation programs; therefore, universities need to distinguish themselves by offering high quality, pedagogically-sound programs that are also responsive to the career changers' desires and needs.

Keywords: online courses, career changer, teacher education, student satisfaction, instructor resources

INTRODUCTION

According to Helppie-McFall and Sonnega (2017), changing careers is a continuing trend in the American workplace, even to the extent that individuals will experience several career transitions during their lifetime. This means that individuals who experience a career change enter "into a new occupation which requires fundamentally different skills, daily routines, and work environments from the present one" (Feldman, 2002, p. 76). Related specifically to the field of education, career changers enter into the teaching profession because they desire to make a difference and pursue meaningful work (Castro & Bauml, 2009; Dieterich & Panton, 1996; Lee, 2011; Lerner & Zittleman, 2002; Nielsen, 2016; Robertson, 2014).

The academic literature has varied in the definitions and labels of those choosing to invest in the pursuit of teaching as a new career. Often career changers are individuals with a baccalaureate degree (Anderson, Fry, & Hourcade, 2014) and a

teachable major (e.g., history, English language arts, biology, math, etc.) earned at least three years prior to admission into a teacher education program (Hart Research Associates, 2010; Konecki et al., 2002). They are over the age of 24 years and have rich and varied life experiences that might include domestic and/or foreign travel, parenthood, previous careers outside schools (Morton, Williams, & Brindley, 2006), or they might be simply someone who has been away from higher education for varying amounts of time (Wilson & Deaney, 2010). Categorically, career changers have been referred to as midcareer changers (Wilson & Deaney, 2010), second-career professionals (Grier & Johnston, 2009; Hanna & Gimbert, 2011; Zuzovsky & Donitsa-Schmidt, 2014), and career switchers (Lerner & Zittleman, 2002). Even though the definitions and labels differ across various studies, the authors will use the definition—individuals with a bachelor's degree in a discipline other than education and choosing to make the change toward an initial license in teaching— and the succinct label career changer.

Because students pursuing a career change to teaching are often managing many responsibilities in life, early research shows that they expect the programs to have organized and meaningful work as they learn the pedagogy in the field of education (Konecki et al., 2002). However, this inquiry into knowing what the career changer expects of an online course has not been further explored, even though research shows that the career changer is a unique adult learner. On the other hand, numerous studies have examined the online experience of a variety of populations and research interests. Examples of these studies include undergraduates' view of trust and motivation in the online environment (Jaasma & Koper, 1999); undergraduates' perceptions of online instruction (Rios, 2019); doctoral candidates' collaboration on online projects in educational leadership courses (Hannigan & Gonzalez, 2019); computer science students' collaborative online learning experiences (Kasiyah, Suhartanto, R-Suhardijono, Santoso, & Sadita, 2019); undergraduate education students' perspectives of online course communication (Vonderwell, 2002); undergraduate introductory communication students' perceptions of instructor humor (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010); and MBA students' perceptions of instructor presence (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006). However, as a field that highly values evidenced-based practices, teacher education has yet to examine what career changers value as part of their teacher preparation coursework. The purpose of this study is to determine the best practices related to components of course design and instructor resources, often reflected in the behaviors of online course instructors, upon which online courses should be structured for career changers who are learning the pedagogy for the first time. Specifically, this study identifies instructor behaviors related to online teaching that career changers view as critical so university faculty can create a supportive online atmosphere rather than speculating on which behaviors are most valuable to these students. Therefore, this study seeks to answer these three research questions:

1. Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do career changers rank as the most important?
2. Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do career changers identify as the least important?
3. How should educator preparation programs design and implement online courses in order to most effectively target career changers needs and desires while also maximizing instructor resources?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Career changers comprise more than one third of all teachers (35%), a pattern even more prevalent for teachers in secondary schools (45%) than in elementary schools (31%) (Harris Interactive, 2010). These students, who already have a four-year degree, can earn teaching credentials through a traditional four-year program or through an alternative pathway. While career changers can select the type of program in which to enroll, alternative routes are more enticing because students can enter the classroom as a teacher of record much more quickly (Hart Research Associates, 2010). In many states, alternative routes to earning a teaching credential in higher education for career changers is through online learning, even though the research is limited on how to best serve these learners in the online environment.

Faculty need to recognize that learning

approaches that are most effective with the adult learner differ from those that are part of the learning process for the undergraduate, first-time college student. Therefore, changes to pedagogy need to be considered so faculty can meet the needs of the career changer without compromising program quality or integrity. In addition, educator preparation programs need to identify how to best use instructor resources to design and deliver meaningful online courses to meet the adult learners' needs.

In the context of online learning, Ojo (2010) defined human resources as the people who "plan, coordinate, organize, and also manage whatever is being put together [and they] represent the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that make it possible to do their jobs" (p. 14). For the purpose of this study, the definition of instructor resources is based on the Ojo (2010) model, which refers to those individuals at higher education institutions who "plan, coordinate, organize and manage [a course]" (p. 14). Thus, educator preparation programs must maximize instructor resources, which include faculty at all levels, to create a positive online atmosphere that supports the adult learner coming to the university as a career changer.

Historically, it was believed that university students highly valued emotional-rational instructor behaviors, such as humor, related to instructional content (Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010), an interpersonal relationship with the instructor (Vonderwell, 2002), or instructor presence (Zhu, 2012) as part of the pedagogy of online course work. Other experts (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Callaway, 2012; Chang, Hurst, & McLean, 2015; Gallagher & LaBrie, 2012; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2009; Hannigan & Gonzalez, 2019; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Kasiyah et al., 2019; Orso & Doolittle, 2011; Rao & Tanners, 2011; Rios, 2019; Shea, Swan, Li, & Pickett, 2005; Sun & Chen, 2016; Vonderwell, 2002; Wanzer, Frymier, & Irwin, 2010) in the field of online learning have suggested an array of additional instructor behaviors that create a positive online course (e.g., clearly described directions; individualized, constructive feedback; ongoing communication; high expectations; higher order cognitive activities; humor; credibility; and caring interactions). The compilation of these instructor behaviors leaves the course instructor to hypothesize which behaviors have the most impact on the online learning experience according to career changers. When instructors are left to randomly determine which of these behaviors have the greatest meaning, they can spend valuable time and resources (i.e., instructor resources) implementing practices that have minimal positive influence on the students' experience.

Although learner feedback is only one factor in course design, it does play a critical role in the evaluation of instructors, programs, and overall university satisfaction. Therefore, course instructors and higher education leaders need to analyze student feedback to create programs that reflect the contemporary career changers' preferences while maintaining the integrity of program design and standards. Recently, this is of particular significance given the projected flatlining of enrollment (Grawe, 2018; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018a) and the increase of costs associated with a higher education—resulting in a smaller pool of potential learners. Although a reality for state institutions of higher education, decreasing enrollment is more apparent for private institutions (Carlson, 2018). What approach to online courses for a career changer can a private institution take to set themselves apart from a less costly state institution?

As a means to expand previous research related to teacher education and online course satisfaction to include the career changer, this study uses a similar survey format previously implemented by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017) with traditional students pursuing a teaching career. In the previous study, students in teacher education were surveyed to rank instructor behaviors that influence online course atmosphere. The findings revealed that candidates ranked variables related to logistics the highest, including: 1) Clearly described directions and requirements; 2) Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback; 3) Consistent and timely feedback; and 4) Instructor updates home page involved in discussion, and provides announcements. Conversely, lower ranked items were associated with emotional-rational behaviors, including: 1) Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor and 2) Humor related to instructional content. Other items relating to academic-cognitive behaviors were ranked in the relative midrange including: 1) Instructor-held high expectations, 2) Opportunity to ask more

questions, and 3) Higher order cognitive activities. One academic-cognitive behavior, Instructor knows content, was ranked third out of the 11 items. Overall, the findings from the study suggest that students in online courses have a strong desire to complete the course and "check it off the list" (i.e., low rank for relationship with the instructor, high rank for desire for clear leadership and timeliness), and they want assignments that are pragmatic and translate to the real world (i.e., low rank for higher order cognitive tasks, high rank for unmet expectations on assignments).

By way of contrast, are career changers more likely to value emotional-rational behaviors of instructors since they may be returning to university coursework after time away from their undergraduate degree and have a different view of online instructional support?

Given the array of life experiences, are career changers more likely to assign a higher rating to academic-cognitive behaviors in the pursuit of advanced academic engagement? Which instructor behaviors do they view as having the most value to an online course atmosphere? With answers to these questions, instructors in teacher preparation programs can design meaningful instruction to maximize the efficacy of the online course design and instructor resources while meeting the unique needs of career changers.

METHOD

Participants

This study was conducted with career changers enrolled as students in a College of Education at a Midwestern private institution particularly because there is a greater decline in enrollment in private institutions as compared to state institutions that can provide a program that is less costly. Career changers were enrolled as graduate students in two licensure areas within a transition to teaching program, and they were surveyed using Survey Monkey during the fall of 2017. Of the 185 students who received a survey, 97 students responded for a 52% response rate. The demographics of the 97 respondents (see Table 2) indicate that their ages spanned from a range of 23 to 41 years with 23–27 years representing the most frequent age range (n = 25). Nearly half of the total sample fell within the 23–32 age range (n = 45). Slightly more than half of the students were enrolled in an elementary education licensure program (n = 56), while less than half of the students were enrolled in a secondary education licensure program (n = 41). The higher number of respondents in the elementary licensure area compared to students in the secondary licensure area parallels the enrollment at this particular university. The elementary licensure area within the transition to teaching program at the time of this study was structured using a cohort model, which had three starts per year. This means that students had a choice of three different months of the year to enroll in the program. The secondary licensure area, however, only had two different starts per year. Therefore, at any given point of time during the year, there were more students enrolled in the elementary licensure area as compared to the secondary licensure area. This split in the number of respondents also roughly parallels the national trend in the teaching profession for the 2015-16 school year with the employment rate of nearly "1.9 million elementary school teachers and 1.9 million secondary school teachers" (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b, para 1).

Materials and Procedure

The students were asked to rank in order ten instructor behaviors that contribute to a positive online course atmosphere (see Table 1). A previous study (Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017) used this survey with traditional students as compared to the career-changing sample of the current study. As noted by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017), the survey that was created from the literature included research that investigated instructor behaviors that influence online course atmosphere (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Meyer, 2014; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Vonderwell, 2002; Wanzer et al., 2010). The survey was also reviewed by an outside rater against Fowler's (2009) four standards for developing survey questions and prompts, and it was pretested to reveal ambiguities, poorly worded prompts, and prompts that are not easily understood (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2019).

The participants in the current study ranked instructor behaviors when creating a positive online atmosphere based on how important each was to the career changer with one as the most important and ten being the least important. Participants also responded to an open-ended question that prompted them to describe up to five instructor behaviors they believe contribute to a negative

online course atmosphere. Providing both a quantitative and qualitative response allows for the use of multiple sources to compare data collected to increase internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additional questions collected demographic information including age, the number of online courses completed, and the program in which students were enrolled.

To collect student survey data, instructors in the online teacher education program for career changers were provided an initial email prior to the course start date explaining the nature of the research study and directions for student participation. Next, the instructors were sent an email they forwarded to students that explained the study and a link requesting that the students complete the survey. Instructors then were sent emails during their final two online sessions that were forwarded to students reminding them once again about the study and to complete the survey if they had not done so already.

RESULTS

Using the categories (i.e., logistics, academic-cognitive, and emotional-rational) generated by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017), the rankings of career changer responses (see Table 3) revealed that the three highest ranked items related to logistics included Clearly described directions and requirements ($\bar{x}$ = 8.47); Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback ($\bar{x}$ = 7.05); and Consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments ($\bar{x}$ = 6.98). Two logistics items—namely, Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor ($\bar{x}$ = 5.17) and Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements ($\bar{x}$ = 4.96) received a midranking and lower ranking, respectively, compared to the other logistics behaviors.

Within the category of emotional-rational behaviors, Humor related to instructional content ($\bar{x}$ = 3.65) was ranked the lowest of all 10 items. Yet Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor, another emotional-rational behavior, was given a midrank at fifth ($\bar{x}$ = 5.82).

The behaviors within the category of academic-cognitive had mixed rankings as well. Higher order cognitive activities ($\bar{x}$ = 4.14) and Instructor-held high expectations ($\bar{x}$ = 3.77) had lower rankings at eighth and ninth, respectively, but Instructor knows the content ($\bar{x}$ = 6.47) was ranked higher at fourth.

A content analysis was completed for qualitative responses and eight categories (see Table 4) emerged as factors that negatively influence an online course atmosphere. Two raters sorted all 326 statements using a forced-choice method to determine the reliability of the eight categories related to instructor behaviors, resulting in a .92 interrater agreement. Categories were further classified into the three themes that aligned with the overall themes in the quantitative data. Academic-cognitive was defined as the instructor's knowledge of course content, opportunities to ask questions, higher order activities, and holding high expectations (e.g., not knowing course content, misleading advice, uploading documents that are not relevant, and inconsistent expectations). Logistics was defined as maintaining course operations (e.g., clearly describing directions; providing feedback; prompt email responses; updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements; poor classroom management). Emotional-rational was associated with instructor affect (e.g., distant, impersonal, not meeting individual needs, and apathetic). Raters classified each of the eight categories with an interrater agreement of .87. Complete frequency and ranking of qualitative responses are found in Table 4.

When comparing qualitative open-ended responses to quantitative ranking, similar themes were equally rated as important. Overall, items related to logistics were ranked the highest in the quantitative data and occurred the most frequently in the qualitative responses accounting for slightly over half the total 326 qualitative comments. In this case, the highest ranked item, Clearly described directions and requirements ($\bar{x}$ = 8.47), was also represented as a frequently occurring category in the qualitative responses. Specifically, Lacks organization (n = 63), the third most frequently occurring concern, was identified by students with examples such as "unclear directions," "unclear expectations," "lack of directions," or "not clear deadlines." Similarly, the second and third ranked logistics items, Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback ($\bar{x}$ = 7.05) and Consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments ($\bar{x}$ = 6.98), respectively, were the most frequently occurring qualitative responses in the Feedback concerns (n = 110) category. These two themes

included comments such as "no timely feedback," "delayed responses to email," "grading without feedback," "no reason for lost points," "lack of real feedback," "vague feedback," and "taking longer than a week to grade."

Logistics themes in the quantitative and qualitative data associated with instructor presence and technology were not as highly rated. For instance, Availability (n = 25) associated with qualitative responses related to "no or minimal communication" and "not able to get in touch" occurred in less than 20% of the total responses. However, unlike other categories where comments were similar but varied, responses in Availability were almost exclusively the specific phrase "lack of communication." An associated logistics quantitative item, Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor ($\bar{x}$ = 5.17), was also not as highly valued and within the midrange ranking. Finally, technology items associated with logistics behaviors were not given high priority. Specifically, quantitative ranking of Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements ($\bar{x}$ = 4.96) along with qualitative Issues with technology (n = 5) noted concerns about "links not working" and "updating website."

An analysis of the qualitative emotional-rational theme suggests that Overall dispositions was the second most frequently occurring behavior identified with comments such as "uninvolved," "lack of interaction on group discussions," "dismissive," "not engaged with students," and "no compassion." However, quantitative rankings of emotional-rational fell within the mid- (i.e., Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor, $\bar{x}$ 5.82) to lower-ranked items (i.e., Humor related to instructional content, ($\bar{x}$ = 3.65).

As a group, academic-cognitive behaviors were scattered among the qualitative and quantitative responses. For example, Meaningful content (n = 29) was ranked fourth with comments such as "not familiar with course content," "boring," and "does not possess expert knowledge." A similar priority was given to the academic-cognitive behavior, Instructor knows content ($\bar{x}$ = 6.47), that was ranked fourth in the quantitative data. However, other academic-cognitive qualitative comments associated with Problematic assignments (n = 16) and Grading procedures (n = 12) occurred less frequently and ranked sixth and seventh, respectively. Similarly, quantitative data associated with academic-cognitive behaviors were also rated less important with Higher order cognitive activities ($\bar{x}$ = 4.14) and Instructor-held high expectations ($\bar{x}$= 3.77) ranked as eighth and ninth, respectively.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study, where students were asked to order and describe course instructors' behaviors that influence an online course atmosphere, provide insight into which aspects of online course design and implementation should be most aggressively pursued and strategically executed. The first research question in this study asked: Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do career changers rank as the most important? The results from the quantitative and qualitative data indicate that career changers highly value certain logistics of course implementation, including clearly described directions and requirements, constructive feedback, consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments, and course organization. Therefore, course logistics is a variable in which universities should invest time and effort.

Students also placed value on academic-cognitive behaviors as evidenced in the ratings of Instructor knows the content in the quantitative data and Meaningful content in the qualitative data. This finding indicates that career changers want assessments and assignments to clearly align to and support tasks they will actually do when they have their own classrooms. Thus, the academic-cognitive behaviors of instructors are another variable in which universities should invest time and effort.

The results also revealed that students ranked the emotional-rational behavior of instructors within the midrange in the quantitative data and high in the qualitative data. This finding suggests career changers at all ages need to feel encouraged, cared for, and sense the instructor's presence in case a need arises. In sum, the emphasis placed by career changers on course instructor emotional-rational behaviors (i.e., dispositions) is a third area in which universities should invest time and effort.

The second research question asked: Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do career changers identify as the least important? The findings from this study indicate that, even

though students are highly concerned about specific instructor behaviors related to logistics, academic-cognitive, and emotional-rational, they are least concerned about a variety of behaviors in these same categories. In the category of logistics, students are least concerned about updates to the home page, involvement in discussions, providing announcements, and [general] communication. In the academic-cognitive category, students are least concerned about higher order cognitive activities, instructor-held high expectations, grading procedures, and problematic assignments. Finally, in the emotional-rational category, students are least concerned with the use of humor by the course instructor. The scores and frequency of these behaviors were valued at mid- to low-range of importance. Thus, the data indicate these are instructor behaviors in which education programs may not need to invest as much time and effort. However, it is uncertain if the complete absence of these behaviors in an online course could have detrimental effects.

The results of this study have several implications. First, the findings in this study support Knowles' (1980, 1984) work related to adult learning theory. Adult Learning Theory suggests that the adult learner has five main characteristics that develop or increase over time, including a self-concept that is self-directed, the use of life experiences as a resource for learning, readiness to learn related to future social roles, internal motivation to learn, and the need for relevant and immediate application of learning experiences. While Knowles' work is decades old, it continues to advance best practices related to teaching the adult learner (Brauer & Ferguson, 2015; Ozuah, 2005; Rodrigues, 2012; Winn, et al., 2018). Furthermore, Knowles' work needs to be considered when discussing the results of this study as it relates to contemporary online instruction. The findings in the current study that suggest adult learners value clear course logistics supports the Adult Learning Theory tenet that adult learners need to be self-directed and immediately apply knowledge and skills. This study also found that adult learners value instructors' academic-cognitive behaviors. This finding supports a second Adult Learning Theory tenet that states adults desire a broad and in-depth base of experiential learning and relevant purposes to their future teaching role. Finally, this study found that adult learners desire instructors' positive emotional-rational behaviors, including encouragement, care, and a sense of presence in online courses. This result supports research that indicates student-instructor relationships influence motivation to learn (Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012). Thus, motivation to learn is a third tenet of Adult Learning Theory supported by this study.

The next implication of this study relates to pedagogy, which answers the research question: How should educator preparation programs design and implement online courses in order to most effectively target career changers needs and desires while also maximizing instructor resources? First, it is clear that course logistics that allow students to efficiently progress through a course should be the highest priority when designing and implementing courses. This means instructors or course writers need clear and consistent training and allocations in several areas. To begin, they need training in how to succinctly, yet clearly write directions and explanations to not only guide students through each assignment but also to support rubrics and timelines. On a similar note, instructors and course writers need protocols for writing clearly organized courses to allow career changers to be self-directed with the personal time they have set aside for coursework. In addition, instructors need designated, prioritized, and protected time in their weekly responsibilities to efficiently grade assignments that include constructive feedback. Finally, instructors and course writers need training on how to create assessments and learning experiences that are focused on "real life" tasks, which are forthcoming when the students have their own classrooms.

The third implication relates to how teacher education programs should train instructors on strategies for making career changers feel encouraged, valued, and cared for within an online learning management system. If students experience positive interactions with an instructor, students are "likely to feel . . . motivated, attend class, and study [resulting] . . . in increased cognitive and affective learning" (Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012, p. 2012). No doubt, instructors in online courses have to make a concerted effort to create positive interactions with the absence of nonverbal communication that is prevalent in face-to-face courses. One effective communication

technique proposed by Daniels (2009) is the "sandwich" technique. This technique is used in replies to emails or constructive feedback where the instructor begins with a positive statement (e.g., "Good question."), provides a response to the inquiry or concern (e.g., "Think about it this way . . ."), and then ends with another positive statement (e.g., "Let me know if you have any other questions. I'm happy to help you succeed in this course."). Another strategy that can create positive interactions in an online course is communicating instructor presence through "live" office hours by phone, email, and/or within the learning management system where instant replies are provided during a certain time frame. In addition, instructors can simply send each student at least one personal note during each course using email or a technology platform, such as Flipgrid, VoiceThread, or Panopto, to touch base about the course experience as a whole or to ask about any personal needs. These strategies allow for positive and personal interactions, which are conducive to a positive, caring atmosphere.

The final implication relates to the rigor of pedagogy within course design. Even though an online teacher preparation program might allow career changers to remain employed full time and have the flexibility to manage other life circumstances (e.g., family events, home life), a teacher preparation program is not designed exclusively for flexibility or convenience. Instead, teacher education faculty are expected to maintain program quality that is within a framework that meets professional standards established by a teacher education accreditation body, such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2019). Therefore, educator preparation programs need to provide instructors time and resources to streamline course content to meet the career changers' learning needs as well as ensure the content is pedagogically sound. In the end, not only will career changers be well served with a flexible program, they will also take part in a program that meets the rigors of accreditation standards.

LIMITATIONS

While the results of this study are compelling, there are a few limitations. First, at the time of this study, frustration may have influenced the response rate. In some courses, students were the first to be migrated to a different university-wide learning management system, which did not yet have all the university-wide online course needs configured yet (e.g., missing documents, missing "submit" buttons, inability to see instructor feedback). Second, this study only surveyed career changers enrolled in one educator preparation program at a Midwest university. In addition, there were only 97 respondents to the survey. While the adult learners' perceptions and beliefs are important, this small group represents career changers in one program. These particular limitations indicate that the results of this study, while informative, cannot be widely generalized. Thus, further research related to the best use of instructor resources in online teacher education programs is warranted. For example, further research might investigate a larger sample size across various public and private teacher education programs with a statistical analysis between licensure areas. Or, public and private teacher education programs might be interested in evaluating student responses at different points in their academic program to determine if there are changes across time. Additionally, institutions that have a large number of online programs might be interested in comparisons across different licensure areas and disciplines of study. For example, do students in an elementary education teacher preparation program value different instructor behaviors than special education, early childhood, or educational administration? Do students seeking an elementary education license value different instructor behaviors than secondary education students, whose disciplines are outside education but integrated into education licensure (e.g., K–12 art, K–12 music, high school business, high school English, computer science, etc.)? Finally, do students in teacher preparation programs in all areas and levels value different instructor behaviors than students in disciplines completely outside education who are not seeking a teaching license (e.g., engineering, architecture, fashion design, social work, psychology)? The answers to these questions could give insight into the need for universities to tailor online courses to specific programs instead of applying a "one size fits all" approach.

CONCLUSION

This study asked students to rank instructor

behaviors that contribute to a positive online course atmosphere and then respond to an open-ended question to describe up to five instructor behaviors they believe contribute to a negative online course atmosphere. Students identified that the logistics of courses and the dispositions of the instructor were variables they regarded as the most important behaviors of online instructors. These findings support seminal research by Knowles (1980), who suggests that adult learners desire to be self-directed and they have an internal motivation to learn that can be inspired by positive student-instructor relationships (see Horan, Martin, & Weber, 2012). These results also support the findings of a previous study by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017), who found that students value a highly organized course and a responsive instructor in regard to creating a positive online course atmosphere.

To further understand the needs of the online career changer in order to determine how to invest in instructor resources, further research is needed to investigate the needs of different licensure areas in education (e.g., special education, administrators) and disciplines outside education connected to education licensure (e.g., high school business, K–12 art). Academic areas often attract individuals with different personalities (Wille, Beyers, DeFruyt, 2012); therefore, it might also be of interest to institutions to compare the needs of online learners in education with other disciplines (e.g., psychology, business). These results of further research in these contexts might influence how education programs invest in instructor resources relative to different online programs.

To date, there is no research to support that online learning is better suited than face-to-face instruction in adult education (Donavant, 2009). Castro and Bauml (2009), however, suggest that online learning is well suited for adult learners because of the personal responsibilities they are managing compared to the typical undergraduate student. The flexibility inherent in online courses and programs is particularly appealing to career changers because it allows them to earn a teaching credential while also meeting the needs of their families, completing work demands, and tending to other personal responsibilities. Yet, just because a course is offered online to career changers, it does not mean that instructor resources are used to effectively "plan, coordinate, organize and manage" (Ojo, 2010, p. 14) the positive learning experiences in that course.

The current study provides evidence related to the behaviors that career changers value most and value least. Specifically, teacher education programs need to invest in training instructors to effectively communicate the logistics of courses (i.e., clearly described directions and requirements, constructive feedback, consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments, and course organization) and train instructors to convey positive dispositions (e.g., encouragement, care, sense of online presence). The findings of this study provide a guide for where teacher education programs should invest time and effort in instructor resources for implementing effective pedagogy and meeting the needs of career changers.

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Tables

Table 1 Online Behaviors Survey

The following are online behaviors instructors exhibit that contribute to a positive online course atmosphere. Please rank each item in importance to you, 1 being most important and 10 being least important.
Give all listed behaviors a number 1 to 10. Do not leave any behaviors without a number.
Clearly described directions and requirements
Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback (e.g., includes correcting wrong assumptions)
Instructor-held high expectations
Higher order cognitive activities
Humor related to instructional content
Instructor knows the content
Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements
Opportunity to ask more questions of the instructor
Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor
Consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments

Note: Items are taken directly from the Survey Monkey distributed to participants.

Table 2 Demographics of Respondents

Variable	f	%
Age Range		
23–27	25	25.77
28–32	20	20.62
33–37	14	14.43
38–42	15	15.46
43–47	12	12.37
41 and older	11	11.34
Licensure Area		
Elementary	56	58.00
Secondary	41	42.27

Note: N=97.

Table 3 Rank Ordering of Online Instructor Behaviors and Positive Course Atmosphere

Online behavior descriptor	M	Median	Mode	SD
Clearly described directions and requirements	8.471	10	10	2.60
Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback	7.052	8	9	2.18
Instructor-held high expectations	3.779	3	2	2.52
Higher order cognitive activities	4.148	4	2	2.21
Humor related to instructional content	3.6510	2	1	2.95
Instructor knows the content	6.474	7	5	2.34
Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements	4.967	5	4	2.55
Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor	5.176	5	3	2.24
Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor	5.825	6	6	2.72
Consistent and timely feedback in emails and assessments	6.983	7	7,10	2.44

Note: N=97. Online behavior descriptors appear in order presented on the Survey Monkey. Means are ranked in order of highest to lowest rating.

Tables

Table 4 Rank Ordering of Qualitative Responses for Behaviors Contributing to Negative Course Atmosphere

Instructor Behavior	*f*	Rank	Type
Feedback concerns	110	1	Logistics
Overall disposition	66	2	Emotional-Rational
Lacks organization	63	3	Logistics
Meaningful content	29	4	Academic-Cognitive
Availability	25	5	Logistics
Problematic assignments	16	6	Academic-Cognitive
Grading procedures	12	7	Academic-Cognitive
Issues with technology	5	8	Logistics

Note: N=97. Based on a total of 326 qualitative responses.