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"Virtual-Togethering!" Principles for Mitigating Apathy in Graduate Courses

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to understand which of the seven principles by Arthur W. Chickering & Zelda Gamson (1987) are amenable to graduate students in a virtual or other online learning environment, and to evaluate the external validity of the seven principles in the context of online teaching. It concludes with a Hierarchical Principles Model, which repurposes these seven principles for faculty to use as a best practice technique to mitigate apathy in virtual masters' courses. The data are based on a survey of students pursuing graduate courses online. Among the seven principles, encouraging student-faculty interaction is perceived to be the *mos*t effective for these participants. They also suggest prompt feedback was the *most* appealing and beneficial. They perceived communicating high expectations was the *least* appealing principle, while encouraging student-student interaction created the *most* hindrance to online learning. Moreover, from a generic perspective, managing their own study time and flexibility is what students liked *best* about virtual learning. What they found *least* effective is their perceived limited communication or interaction with faculty. Furthermore, the findings suggest online graduate students, while perceived to be non-traditional, still expect faculty to be constantly engaged online. Although Chickering & Gamson did not give a hierarchical arrangement to their seven principles, the results and efficacy of this study suggests that when adopted to online learning for masters' students, the principles need to be reordered in a Hierarchical Principles Model, which we developed to be used as a best practice approach for online teaching and learning in masters' courses.

Keywords: *Apathy; Distance learning; Online learning; Virtual learning*

BACKGROUND and INTRODUCTION

One of the fundamental issues currently affecting higher education is how to manage teaching in an online or virtual setting and to mitigate apathy as students are opting to pursue graduate education online. The authors hypothesized that the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, developed for use in teaching face-to-face (FTF), by Chickering & Gamson (1987) could potentially benefit faculty and students in mitigating apathy in a virtual learning environment, when extrapolated and arranged in a hierarchy. Apathy (also referred to as lethargy) is most defined as a lack of feeling, emotion, interest, or concern. It is a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions. The rise in Internet technology is an integral part of helping to adopt to changes in the environment of higher education with distance learning (synchronously and asynchronously) and more recently virtual learning, using several on-line meeting platforms such as, Zoom©, Teams©, and WebEx©. Therefore, we use the term "Virtual-Togethering," coined by one of the authors, to depict the times and space of connecting, teaching, and learning online.

Peter Drucker foresaw this change in the world of business and education when more than 30 years ago, in 1992, he authored an article in the Harvard Business Review entitled, *"The New Society of Organisations.*" He discussed several predictions including, that over the next 50 years, schools and universities will change more drastically than their form some 300 years ago. He may

have been correct but could not have predicted that in the year 2020 there would have been a global pandemic, COVID-19, and the need for separation of space, labeled social distancing by the Center for Disease Control (CDC). While the pandemic exploded, universities required more innovative ways of teaching to support this need for social distancing. Therefore, in an unprecedented and dynamic manner, they immediately turned to teaching online using several virtual platforms referenced above (Kelani, Doral, & Post, 2021). They also indicate that while online courses have become increasingly popular, not all students thrive in this environment. Additionally, Dikkatw & Gonela (2022) observed that as the world witnessed this unprecedented pandemic in 2020, it came to a standstill. The scientific community scrambled to search for answers, physical activity stalled, and virtual education became the new reality. They also noted, in the interim, that while stakeholders were learning to get accustomed to the new normal, some parts of classroom delivery seamlessly shifted to online methods, while other segments adopted quickly.

Nevertheless, it is important to recall that before the pandemic, online courses were already gaining popularity through asynchronous distance learning programs. However, with the current trends in technology and with the available virtual platforms, faculty feel more pressure to provide their educational content by modeling their FTF instructional modalities in the virtual setting. This is evident in the questions that Lambert et al. (2014) posed regarding the ways faculty can provide instruction that reflects the educational experiences and expectations that changes in technology allows. Therefore, more than ever we need to understand how to help students mitigate apathy and keep them engaged in the virtual educational settings. Mitigating apathy is a shared priority for many universities and this research will be helpful in more strategically directing those efforts to harvest the greatest benefit for all parties in higher education. Accordingly, the purpose of the study was to understand which of the seven principles, offered by Chickering & Gamson (1987) can mitigate apathy in a virtual learning setting, and to propose a Hierarchical Principles Model as best practice approach to online teaching at the master's level.

The data was gathered using a qualitative survey of graduate students pursuing their master's degree online. The findings suggest that encouraging student-faculty interaction is the most effective among the seven principles. In contrast, their perceived lack of communication or interaction with faculty is the least effective. Furthermore, we found that, while perceived as non-traditional, graduate students are not more sophisticated than undergraduate learners. They expect faculty to be constantly engaged online. Based on these results, we posit a best practice model for faculty to use in managing their online modalities for mitigating apathy. The study adds to that gap in graduate accounting education best practices for virtual learning. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: a literature review, methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion which discusses the implications of our paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The extant literature on issues related to online learning has focused primarily on undergraduate education. Additionally, the literature in this context is starkly divided between studies conducted pre and post COVID-19 and with more emphasis on synchronous learning (Virtic et al., 2021). This study focuses on graduate students' perception of asynchronous distance learning (DL). Therefore, this literature review highlights historic and recent changes in online education, the core concepts of apathy, and the *Seven Principles of Good Practice* by Arthur Chickering & Zelda Gamson (1987). These seven principles focus on traditional in-class teaching and were deemed applicable in some instances to online learning (Dreon, 2013).

"Virtual-Togethering" in the Classroom Pre & Post COVID-19

Pre COVID-19 DL has been a method of teaching and learning and a subject of studies in pedagogy, andragogy, and psychology for several decades (Palatovska et al., 2021). However, it has become more strategic in the higher education realm, specifically during the COVID-19 years (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Bada, 2022; Smalley, 2020). In 1992, Peter Drucker predicted that in the next 50 years, "schools and universities will change more drastically than they have since they assumed their present form 300 years ago when they organized themselves around the printed book" (Drucker, 1992, p. 97). Levine & Sun (2002) also indicated that, as a result of the rise of new technologies, higher education will likely divide into three types of institutions: (1) "brick" institutions which attracts traditional students typically in ages between 18 to 22; (2) "click" universities which will focus on non-traditional population such as adult learners and part-time students; (3) a combination of the two as the "brick and click" institution which will stand out as attractive alternatives for students who are also interested in online education. Renes & Strange (2011) indicated that distance learning in higher education had the potential to create more opportunities for the students who were previously eliminated from higher education due to their inability to physically sit in the classroom to fully participate in higher education. Fisher & Sadera (2011) and other scholars referenced distance learning in higher education and its ability to create environments for the following underserved learners:

- Students with physical disabilities (Crow, 2008)
- Students in rural areas (Keramidas, Ludlow, Collins, & Baird, 2007)
- Adult learners (Ke & Xie, 2009; Moore, 2010)

These students can receive more convenient and easier access to the educational process. Consequently, by eliminating the barriers of time and distance, such learners can now have more opportunities to take charge of their own lifelong learning (Almajali & Al-Lozi, 2016).

Masalimova et al, (2022) stated that early in the history of distance education, most interactions between professors and students were asynchronous. With the advent of the Internet, synchronous work prospects expanded to include anything from chat rooms to videoconferencing. Regardless, it is especially important that the successful implementation of distance learning depends on research and whether the students are keen to adopt and accept this method of education and to the adaptation of the required technology. Therefore, Blackmon & Major (2012) pursued a qualitative study to help our understanding and to synthesize the data regarding students' perception of distance learning. They found student factors that influenced their experience and instructor factors that influenced student experience. Other findings have shown that online education implementation is not simply a technological solution, but also a process of many distinct factors such as social factors (Schepers & Wetzels, 2007), and individual factors (Liaw & Huang, 2011). In addition to behavioral factors, Greenberg (1998) states that contemporary distance learning is "a planned teaching/learning experience that uses a wide spectrum of technologies to reach learners at a distance and is designed to encourage learner interaction and certification of learning" (pg. 36).

The literature indicates that the dilemma is not just technology itself, but how it is used in the design and delivery of courses to encourage learners so they would not experience apathy. It is a crucial component that faculty set the tone for virtual learning in the educational environment. Omoregie (1997) suggested that the effectiveness of distance learning is based on preparation, the instructors' understanding of the needs of the students, and an understanding of the target population. Alternatively, Brophy (2004) pointed out that students' "apathy, not discouragement, is the ultimate motivational problem facing teachers" (p. 307). It was based on these and other studies that universities sought to improve and support distance learning with research. For example, faculty in the Distance Education Center at the University of West Georgia formed a support group,

the “Online Refresh Faculty Learning Community” (FLC) to promote best practice approaches to distance learning (Rath, Olmstead, Zhang, & Beach, 2019). They also conducted a study which showed that 55% of participants were skilled with using technology, yet they preferred in person learning.

Post COVID-19, various studies emerged due to the need for the entire educational realm (K-12 to higher education) to quickly adapt to the DL platform. For example, Bada (2022) supported virtual learning for masters’ courses. He highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on underserved students in Uganda. He found that students in his study (80%) strongly recommended the e-learning approach for postgraduate studies. They expressed several benefits from online classes and the e-learning platform, used to support MBA students in several ways including, flexibility in submission of assignments; knowledge sharing through discussion forums; accessible learning materials and collaboration with the course instructor and students at any time.

With respect to how graduate students reacted to the pandemic, Dikkatwar & Gonela (2022) in their study of graduate management students from a top tier B-School in India, found that problem based learning in general and case method, was top in the list of delivery methods that had to adopt online classes. Using a focus group discussion technique, their study explored the experiences of management graduate students regarding online case methods. Their findings suggest that the students had a disconnect with the online case discussions due to several reasons ranging from technical glitches and snags to case preparation and discussion, to peer-learning and faculty interactions.

Al-Mawee, Kwayu, & Gharaibeh (2021) noted that as the distance learning process became more prevalent in the USA due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand students’ experiences, perspectives, and preferences about the process and how it affected their education. Their study utilized Western Michigan University as their case study and the participants completed an online survey used to measure distance learning and instructional methods. The results showed that students found their experiences were negatively impacted due to a lack of social interaction but were in favor of experiences such as time and location flexibility.

Apathy

Apathy is best defined as a lack of feeling, emotion, interest, or concern. It is also defined as a state of indifference, or the suppression of emotions! Many researchers, educators, and policy makers have investigated factors contributing to student apathy in higher education. Students often display attitudes of lethargy, apathy, and sometimes boredom in class. Yet, focus and attention are important characteristics for success. Therefore, it is incumbent upon faculty to devise strategies to motivate students and promote active participative engagement in classrooms.

The DL study proffered by the University of West Georgia highlights the way the course structure influenced the perceptions of students. The authors concluded that quality and efficacy of distance learning environments required successful student contact with faculty as a key to the success of online courses (Rath, Olmstead, Zhang & Beach, 2019). Latz et al., (2008) and Logan (2011) recognized that learning is not a one size fits all approach. In this study, we used the theoretical framework of Positive Psychology, where definitions of apathy would translate to, because of the individual feelings, students do not possess the level of skill required to confront a challenge. Ornstein & Hunkins (1998) noted that a learner who is not motivated will not really perceive a problem, so problems selected for study should be derived from learner interests. Palloff & Pratt (2000) indicated that technology does not instruct students, effective teachers do. If students are not provided with self-effacing reasons to be engaged within academic guidelines, they become disengaged after the first week or so of beginning the distance learning course. Walcott (1994) found in a meta-analysis of 6 of 11 studies of adult distance learning that “to effectively bridge the

gaps between classroom and distance teaching, faculty need to look at the distance teaching from the students' point of view" (pg. 249). See also Carter (2001). Being involved in a collaborative learning process is a crucial part of developing the foundation of distance learning, students need to feel a part of a collaborative learning community (Waugh & Jian Su, 2016). When this is not encouraged, participation level goes down and two-way communications will be absent, and apathy will surface. Therefore, instructors need to be aware of this apathy in the distance learning environment and to encourage collaborative learning environments among the students.

According to Page & Mukherjee (2000) implementing the Seven Principles led to decreased student apathy and increased student curiosity and involvement, as well as personal satisfaction for the instructor. Greenberg (1998) indicated that students in collaborative learning environments often feel less pressure to perform individually, and more pressure to collaborate and be part of the team. Vrasidas & McIsaac (1999) found that the feedback provided to students also influenced interaction. Palloff & Pratt (2007) indicates that virtual learners often report feeling alone and or isolated during participation in online courses. Therefore, in encouraging a collaborative learning community with a social component, Palloff & Pratt (2007 and 2013) remind us that online learning can be effective if faculty and students help each other to reduce a student's sense of isolation. They also noted that their main concerns are in helping students be successful by promoting best practices in the classroom and in the administration of online learning.

In addition to the above literature, the efficacy of this study shows how students define apathy. More recent studies on apathy and students' attitudes toward distance learning differ according to the studies. For example, (Mathew & Chung, 2020) and Avsheniuk et al., (2021), stated that some students have a positive attitude towards their online education and work hard to be successful. Other studies report the negative attitudes students have about online learning and highlight their anxiety and fear of online learning (Bozavlı, 2021; Yurdal et al., 2021). Other researchers found that students' attitudes are moderate or tempered. They are more apathetic or indifferent in their attitude towards online learning (Akcil & Bastas, 2021). This study also found students are open to defining their perception of apathy.

The Seven Teaching Principles

Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gamson (1987) developed the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education, which have been used numerous times in the literature on teaching FTF courses. They posit using the seven principles faculty will follow as outlined in Figure 1 below.

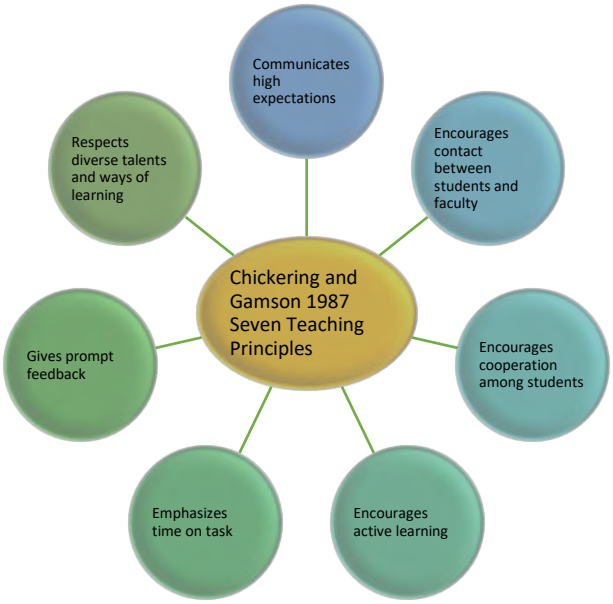

Figure 1: The Seven Teaching Principles by Chickering & Gamson (1987)

These principles are not organized in any specific hierarchy in the seminal works of Chickering & Gamson (1987, 2006), nor were they linked to online or virtual learning back then, having been developed as a guide for face-to-face learning. About a decade ago, these principles began to emerge as a tool for distance learning and online teaching. For example, the Dutton e-Education Institute at the University of Pennsylvania developed a faculty peer review tool based on these principles, which they believed are valuable to online teaching, but noted there are nuances due to the online environment (Taylor, 2010). Although these seven principles of good practice have been documented many times in the literature, the importance of this study is the gap in literature, specifically related to online masters' courses and the participants who in this study provided a definition of effective online teaching. Bradford & Peck (1997) used these principles for teaching accounting education by focusing on student motivation and active learning.

Subsequently, due to the rise of Internet technology in higher education, Chickering & Ehrmann (1996) also indicated the above principles could be applied to technology-based teaching. Since there is no interaction between the instructor and students in virtual learning environments, Wang (2013–2014) indicated that instructors can be seen as authoritarians; the students will perceive the instructor's comments as impersonal. Yet, Kontos (2015) suggested that applying these seven principles of excellent and effective teaching to online instruction "presents unique challenges to the modern instructor" (pg. 37). Young (2006) provided seven items like those of Chickering & Gamson (1987) for an online classroom, that when combined may enhance effective learning. They highlighted characteristics which proffer connections between the instructor and the students, when pursued in combination with the course content. These items are adapting to student needs, providing meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively, and showing concern for student learning. Nevertheless, the above study does not specifically operationalize the seven principles.

Additionally, a limited number of anecdotal articles (Geoffcain, 2022), blog posts and universities centers for teaching and learning have suggested these principles can be used in online learning

(Siering, 2020). For example, in 2013 Dreon, in a blog post, indicated that although 25 years had passed since the seven principles were developed for best practice face-to-face instruction, they were still useful in the classroom. He also suggested the principles could translate well to the online classroom and help to provide guidance for faculty who were designing online courses. However, based on our search there is limited empirical research data, specifically offering findings of how this concept can be adopted to masters' courses or how the principles can be operationalized. Hathaway (2014) suggested that online learning was becoming more common for students pursuing college degrees and therefore, curriculum designers must evaluate the best ways in which to deliver information and assess student knowledge in an online forum. The article analyzed the usefulness of each of the principles and suggested ways in which the principles can be used effectively as a technique in an online teaching forum. Therefore, this study adds to the limited extant literature in this context.

METHODOLOGY

In this study we examined if and how the Seven Principles by Chickering & Gamson (1987) can mitigate apathy in virtual or distance learning by having a "conversation" with online graduate students. Participants were 115 online Master of Science in Accounting students (n=72) from one non-profit "traditional" state sponsored university and (n=43) from one for-profit "non-traditional" university. Data was collected over one academic year, in 6 courses, with an average of 30 students in each course. These courses were either the same or equivalent and were all taught asynchronously. For example, the controllership, and comparative advanced managerial course are equivalent.

The participants responded to eight sets of open-ended qualitative survey questions about their individual experiences with OL in the context and themes of the Seven Principles. Deductive and inductive qualitative (thematic) content analyses were used to analyze the responses to the questions. Additionally, demographic questions were asked to understand the gender, family status, age, and employment status of the students. It was important to understand these demographics to get a sense of the caliber of students who were taking these courses. Additionally, from a research perspective demographic data describe the sample of the participants in this study because it offers quantifiable statistics of a particular population and to eliminate the possibility of false positives and outliers (Ray 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The results are highlighted based on demographics, and thematic questions using descriptive statistics and average means. The percentage distributions are augmented by student's responses to qualitative open-ended questions as outlined in Tables 1-7. The results are followed by a section discussing the findings.

The data in Table 1 outlines the distribution of the demographics, employment, and salaries. It shows that the majority of respondents are Female (53%); Male (47%). Most of the participants, 56% in the study, are married, and 57% have children. Most of those who are single (75%) are male; additionally, 58% of those without children are male. Women married and with children were in the older age group. The younger age ranges 18-35 are primarily males and single. 51% reported they would not pursue their degree in an alternate format, of which 59% were males. Of the 54% in entry-staff level jobs, 56% are male. 80% of females are employed in the management, supervisory, and upper-management levels and 68% are also in higher salary ranges, $70-120K.

Table 1**:** *Participant demographics, employment status, salary range percentage distributions*

Variables	Responses	Percentage Distribution	Gender Specific Information
Gender	Male Female	47 % 53%	
Marital/ Marital/ Family Status	Married Single Children No children	56% 44% 57% 43%	Of 44% single 75% are male; of 43% without children 58% are male
Age	18-24 25-35 36-44 45-55	17% 31% 43% 11%	Of the 48% in the combined 18-35 age range 70% are male
Employment Status/(years)	Entry Level (0-3) Staff (4-10) Manager/Super (10-15) Upper-level Manager (16-20)	24% 30 % 34% 12%	Of 54% in entry-staff 56% are male. Of 46% manager or upper level, 20% are male
Salary Range in ($000)	**30-50** **51-69** 70-89 90-120	**48%** **30%** 18% 4%	Of the 78% in the **combined $30-69K** salary range, 88% are male
Degree: MSA-Would pursue degree in alternate format	Strongly/Agree Don't know Strongly/Disagree	34% 15% 51%	Of 15% don't know 97% are male; of 51% disagree, 59% are male

The data in Table 2 below outlines the results of the responses to generic questions about learning online. It shows that a plurality of participants (45%) are pursuing a master's degree to prepare to sit for the Certified Public Accounting (CPA) or Certified Management Accounting (CMA) Exams. This is followed by career advancement (36%). Managing their own study time and flexibility is what the majority (73%) like best about virtual or online learning. Conversely, limited communication or interaction with faculty is what a plurality (47%) liked least about online learning.

Table 2: *Broad questions about learning online*

Variables	Responses	Percentage Distribution
Marital/ **Reason for pursuing degree**	Preparing for CPA/CMA or higher degree Career Advancement Family/other	45% 36% 21%
Like best about VL	Manage own study time/flexibility Convenience of not commuting to campus	73% 27%
Like least about VL	Limited communication or interaction (with faculty) Difficulty understanding concepts Technological difficulties and disruptions Teaching yourself everything	47% 23% 10% 20%

The tables below outline the results of the specific thematic questions based on the core conceptual framework of the Seven Principles. For each question, the descriptive statistics are augmented by example of the related qualitative responses

Q1: *In the context of higher education, broadly defined, which of these 7 principles appeals to you the most, why?*

As noted in Table 3, of the seven principles, the one that appeals most to (36%) of participants, is for faculty to give prompt feedback.

Table 3: *Principle which appeals most*

Seven Principles	Percentage Distribution	Qualitative Responses-Students Quotes
Give Prompt Feedback	36%	*It is nice to get feedback very quickly to let the student know if we are doing the work correctly.*
Encourage Student-Faculty Interaction	18%	*Being able to have communication with the professor and the other students could make the student feel more involved in the class.*
Encourage Active Learning	15%	*Feeling involved would make the student want to try harder and be more a part of the class.*
Emphasize Time on Task	12%	
Other 3 principles combined	19%	

Q2: *In the context of higher education, broadly defined, which of these 7 principles appeals to you the least, why?*

The data in Table 4 highlights the principle that appeals least to participants. It is communicating high expectations. 37% do not think it is necessary for faculty to tell adults how to strategize their own goals and expectations. Although only one student quote is highlighted in the table, there were several similar sentiments expressed by other participants. Another student said, *"The pure act of setting expectations may motivate some but does little to foster a great learning environment or to ensure that the student is equipped with everything that they need to perform at a high level."*

Table 4: *Principle which appeals least*

Seven Principles	Percentage Distribution	Qualitative Responses-Students Quotes
Communicate High Expectations	37%	*I do not see the point in communicating high expectations.*
Encourage Student-Student Interaction	29%	*Student-faculty interaction is important, but sometimes student-student interaction is not that important, and I do not like teamwork.*
Emphasize Time on Task	29%	*Emphasizing time on a task is the least important principle. Teaching needs to have structure, but students need time to develop their skills.*
Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	5%	

***Q3**: In the context of distance/online learning, which of these principles benefits the distance learning experience, how?*

The data in Table 5 addresses the response to the question of the principle which benefits the students' learning experience and how. As can be surmised from the analysis and qualitative responses, a plurality of participants (26%) advocated for faculty offering prompt feedback. In addition to the quote in the table, another student noted*, "It helps to be able to easily get in touch with the professor as they are the ones that are there to help the student learn and grow so they can let us know how we are doing*. 23% require faculty to respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

***Table 5:** Principle which benefits*

Seven Principles	Percentage Distribution	Qualitative Responses-Students Quotes
Give Prompt Feedback	26%	*Often, the only time an online faculty member learns of an area of weakness in a student (or a whole class) is after the student's poor performance on an evaluation or deliverable. At that point it may be too late.*
Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	23%	*Online classes seem to categorize students using a cookie-cutter approach.*
Encourage Student-Faculty Interaction	19%	*I feel that without having the faculty and student interaction class would have no real-life connection.*
Encourage Active Learning	14%	*I have taken many online courses. There needs to be several techniques for keeping students actively involved*
Other principles combined	18%	

***Q4:** In the context of distance/online learning, which of these principles hinders the distance learning experience, how?*

The data in Table 6 highlights the participants' perception of what hinders their learning. Of the seven Principles, 40% believe that encouraging student-to-student interaction is the one that hinders their performance. One student said, *"Discussion forums are informative and engage the students in a common thread and with the Teacher's moderation are more effective than Teamwork Assignments."* Additionally, 39% of the students also perceive that communicating high expectations also hinders their learning. Another student said, *"I think students should realize that pursuing any higher education degree will require lots of work and high expectations,"*

***Table 6:** Principle which hinders*

Seven Principles	Percentage Distribution	Qualitative Responses-Students Quotes
Encourage Student-Student Interaction	40%	*This principle is hard to translate to an online learning environment. Even though the Teamwork formats encourage interaction between students, it is more of a forced situation than a natural process of interaction that is seen in Face-to-Face classrooms.*
Communicate High Expectations	39%	*This should be a given and the instructor should not have to expend time on communicating this.*

Emphasize Time on Task	14%	
Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	7%	

Q5*: In the context of distance/online learning, which of these principles would you use to help mitigate any apathy you feel in your Online Learning experience?*

The data in Table 7 describes the results of the participants' perception of best practice of mitigating their own apathy. The results suggest 45% believe that encouraging student and faculty interaction was the most effective way to help them stay engaged and mitigate apathy. As one student explained, *"The first week of class was really testing. I have to say that was the hardest first week in any online course that I have even taken. I looked forward to the second week and thought the pace would slow, but that was not the case!*

Table 7: *Principle which mitigates apathy*

Seven Principles	Percentage Distribution	Qualitative Responses-Students Quotes
Encourage Student-Faculty Interaction	45%	*I applaud the professor's efforts for participating in class discussions on a regular basis and this helped me get over the hump of starting a new class!*
Encourage Active Learning	31%	*I love the interaction between student-student and student-instructor inside of a classroom.*
Emphasize Time on Task	17%	
Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning	7%	
Other 3 principles combined	7%	

Q6: *How do you [personally] define Apathy?*

This question was intended to be responded to in a qualitative format only. It asks how students would define apathy. The following are excerpts from two students Qualitative Responses:

> *"Some students become disengaged or may tune out due to lack of interest in course materials, or when the professor's expectation exceeds the deliverables. This could also allow the students to become disengaged because the material is distributed, but the professor lacks the ability to teach, instead they expect the student to be the expert*." (Student)
>
> *"Distance learning can be challenging for many students. It is sometimes difficult to stay engaged in the course work. I have taken many online courses. There need to be several techniques for keeping students actively involved." (*Student)

DISCUSSION

This discussion highlights the most important results and summarizes the students' perceptions of how the principles positively or negatively impacted their experience in the online space. The validity of the demographic results in Table 1 are supported by overall US population data. For example, a study of online master's degree students by research.com reveal 54% were females and 46% were males. Likewise, a study by the National Center for Education statistics (NCES)

show that 56.8% of online master's students are over 30 years old. This may indicate women's preference for virtual learning because of issues such as balancing education with family commitments, which could be challenging when pursuing degrees in a traditional format. It is interesting that the majority - 51% would not pursue their degree in an alternate format. Males are also in the younger age ranges 18-35, and single groups. Therefore, family life may not be the main issue for this group not pursuing their degrees in another format. Employment status may answer this question since most at the entry level were males. It was surprising that a great plurality of females was who held the management, supervisory, and upper-management level positions and earned the higher salaries.

Positive. The findings suggest students' desire for faculty to be engaged in the online learning platform. A plurality perceived that limited communication or interaction with faculty is what they liked least about online learning. One student stated:

> "*I feel that without having the faculty and student interaction class would have no real-life connection*."

Students perceive this principle of student faculty interaction as the most important to their success. One student noted:

> "*Being able to have communication with the professor and the other students could make the student feel more involved in the class."*

Additionally, students perceived prompt feedback as the principle they would like most to be enacted by faculty in the online learning space. They like to know how they are progressing and prompt feedback on discussions, and assignments can help them see early signs of their progress. One student suggested this as a means of helping to ensure their success as they expressed:

> "*Often, the only time an online faculty member learns of an area of weakness in a student (or a whole class) is after the student's poor performance on an evaluation or deliverable. At that point it may be too late."*

They perceive this action as helping them know if they need to refocus their learning strategy. Feedback includes extended communication with faculty, as one participant said:

> "*It also helps to be able to easily contact the professor as they are the ones that are there to help the student learn and grow!"*

Students also advocated for faculty to respect diverse talents and ways of learning. Because they do not appreciate the cookie-cutter approach to learning. Students feel the lack of face-to-face interaction allows anonymity or indifference from faculty. Therefore, they can ignore the diversity of students' learning and abilities. One student noted:

> "*Online classes seem to categorize students using a cookie-cutter approach."*

Negative. Setting expectations is what students perceive as the least appealing principle. This was surprising as faculty tend to promote setting expectations in their syllabus and/or course overviews and believe that helps students stay on task. That is one of the seven principles which is proffered for undergraduate students. One student explained it this way:

> "*I do not see the point in communicating high expectations.*"

It is understandable with this caliber of participants, who, as the demographics suggest, are highly sophisticated and have high-level career positions, that they already know how to self-actualize

and set their own expectations. The question on hindrances gives further insight into how students really feel about this principle. Here is one student's statement about setting expectations:

> "*This should be a given and the instructor should not have to expend time on communicating this."*

Encouraging student-student interaction and emphasizing time on tasks are tied for the second least appealing principles as noted in the related qualitative responses. Students do not value interactions among themselves and do not like teamwork. It seems some students were more nuanced in their perception of this principle and felt it is a hindrance and not as important. Here is one student's statement:

> *Student-faculty interaction is important, but sometimes student-student interaction is not that important, and I do not like teamwork."*

Additionally, they do not believe that it is easy to navigate this technique in the online space as one student stated:

> *"This principle is hard to translate to an online learning environment. Even though the Teamwork formats encourage interaction between students, it is more of a forced situation than a natural process of interaction that is seen in Face-to-Face classrooms."*

This negative perception of the principle of student-student interaction is a bit surprising because instructors usually say participation in class is important. However, students believe this is not an effective means of learning.

It also seems these students do not think emphasizing time on tasks allows them the autonomy to develop their own skills. Here is another example of the students' perceptions about these principles:

> "*Emphasizing time on a task is the least important principle. Teaching needs to have structure, but students need time to develop their skills."*

Mitigating Apathy. Encouraging student-faculty interaction and active learning are the top principles they perceive can help mitigate apathy. For example, here are some of the students' responses:

> "*Being able to have communication with the professor and the other students could make the student feel more involved in the class."*

As another student explained, interactions overall are imperative to online learning, but this cannot take the place of face-to-face in-class learning:

> "*Unfortunately for me, nothing can take the place of in-class learning; at least I used to think so. I don't know, I guess I'm just one of those people who like to see the instructor face to face but having this professor as an online instructor was the next best thing to being there. If you wanted to mitigate apathy for online learning, you've done it, great job!"*

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, we established the most and least advantageous characteristics of online learning from the perception of graduate students. Using generic questions as well as thematic questions based on the Seven Principles by Arthur W. Chickering & Zelda Gamson (1987), the data was based on a survey of 115 students pursuing graduate courses in accounting. The sample included 53% Female and 47% Male. 34% are employed in a management or supervisory role; 78% earn

in the $30-69K salary range of which 88% are male. 34% agree, while 51% disagree they would pursue their degree in an alternate format.

From a generic perspective, managing their own study time and flexibility is what these students liked best, while limited communication or interaction with faculty is what they liked least about virtual learning platforms in higher education. Of the seven principles on which the study is based, giving prompt feedback was the most appealing and beneficial principle for online learning. Encouraging student-faculty interaction is perceived as the most effective principle for mitigating apathy for these participants. They perceived communicating high expectations as unnecessary and the least appealing principle while encouraging student-student interaction created the most hindrance to online learning. Furthermore, the findings also suggest that online graduate accounting students, while perceived as non-traditional, still require the attention of faculty. Also surprising was the percentage of these master's students who still need interaction with and access to faculty; they expect faculty to be constantly engaged online. The greatest surprise was that the students were adamant there was no need for faculty to communicate high expectations.

Implications

As we established in the literature overview, several studies indicate that virtual or e-learning is important in today's graduate education and can be used to mitigate challenges in teaching and learning delivery modalities when educational issues arise, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature also established that it is imperative to have specific strategies and best practices to ensure a compelling online experience. Therefore, the overarching implication of this study posits that the seven principles by Chickering & Gamson (1987) are adaptable to virtual learning settings. These principles can support a best practice approach in online masters' courses, engage students in a collaborative learning environment, and mitigate the apathy students may feel in the course. However, our findings suggest that students in this study strongly support the need for the principles to be re-arranged to be effective for graduate students. Therefore, we created a Hierarchical Principles Model (HPM). This HPM suggests the pinnacle of the Model should be the most appealing and beneficial principle, encouraging student-faculty interaction. The Model's base should be the least appealing, least beneficial, and a hindrance to students. This communicates high expectations (See Figure 2 for the HPM).

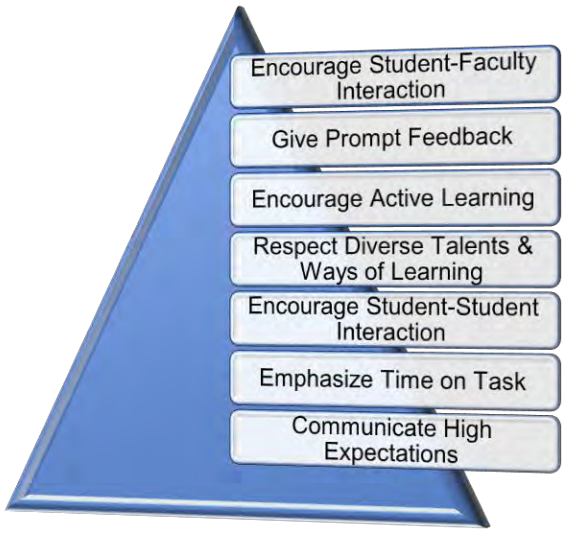

Figure *2:* *"Hierarchical Principles Model" to Mitigate Apathy in Online Graduate Courses*

While the HPM offers a hierarchy for engagement as a technique and best-practice approach, we also offer the key techniques as a summary to give faculty the opportunity to modify their teaching approach to the atmosphere of the course and to their own teaching styles:

- Prompting feedback is particularly important!
- Emphasizing high expectations is not at all important!
- Student-to-faculty interaction is critical to mitigate apathy!
- The findings underscore the adage that one cannot expect students to be engaged unless first their instructor is engaged; therefore, faculty need to leverage student-to-faculty interaction by offering the following best practice approaches:
    - Requirements for student interaction are clearly stated
    - Use a variety of materials that promote active learning and motivate students
    - Scheduling the instructor is paramount
    - Instructors must be constantly accessible; they want your attention!

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