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by

April Lyman Williams

May 2013

A STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AN ONLINE CREDIT RECOVERY
INITIATIVE IN PREVENTING HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS

A Doctoral Thesis Presented to the
Faculty of the College of Education
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education
in Professional Leadership

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May 2013

Dedication

For My Children

Lauren, Brooklyn, Madison, & Christopher

You are my inspiration to achieve greatness. I can only hope that the sacrifices that I have made these past two years show you that anything you put your mind to is possible. Anything! I love you more than you could ever know.

And will you succeed? Yes! You will indeed! (98 $\frac{3}{4}$ percent guaranteed)!

KID YOU'LL MOVE MOUNTAINS

-Dr. Seuss, Oh the Places You'll Go

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis committee. Dr. MacNeil, Dr. Busch, and Dr. Emerson, your patience and knowledge throughout this process is indescribable. A special thank you to Dr. Freiberg who started this journey with me. You undoubtedly gave me the foundation and confidence I needed to make it through this process, thank you. Dr. Julie Fernandez, who started with me mid-way, but who has been constantly there when I needed you, through email, texts, and visits. I know this was your first rodeo, and you did an outstanding job, thank you.

To my colleagues and friends at my district. Your undying drive to educate students is one of my biggest motivators. Continue being an advocate for our students, and they will all indeed one day know the importance of being educated. They will look back and appreciate you as much as I do.

Many thanks to my fellow classmates who have provided me with friendship and support and with whom I have shared laughter, frustration, and companionship. A special thank you to Aurora and Jilliane, our friendship will not be forgotten long after we graduate. The best of luck to all of you in your endeavors.

I cannot begin to express my gratitude to my family and close friends for all the love, support, encouragement, and prayers they have sent my way along this journey. You all can never know how much your smiles and “I can’t believe you are doing this with four

children” has meant to me! And not to forget, of course, keeping my kids at the drop of a hat for me. A heartfelt thank you to my cousin, Serenity, who did not hesitate to say “yes” when I asked her to run my data for me. You saved me!

Juanita and Mark, your encouragement and support throughout this process has been irreplaceable. Your drive and determination to succeed has no doubt been a source of my inspiration.

To my mom and dad, your sacrifices throughout my education and your expectation for nothing less than academic excellence has been a pivotal reason in me believing that I could achieve so much. I know my father would be so proud of this moment.

Finally, to Chris. Thank you for being there for me at the end of the day. Your love and support is what has gotten me through when I wanted to give up. Your sacrifices have not gone unnoticed.

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May 2013

Williams, April L. "A Study of the Effectiveness of an Online Credit Recovery Initiative in Preventing High School Dropouts." Unpublished Doctoral Thesis. May 2013.

Abstract

According to the Texas Public Education Information and Management System (PEIMS) Student Data Report (2011), a total of 21,813 students in the class of 2011, Grade 9 cohort, dropped out. The focus of this study is to determine the current state of online learning opportunities available to at-risk, inner-city youth, in order for them to complete their high school diploma. A non-experimental, descriptive design research study was conducted. The study looked at a population of inner-city students who completed online credit recovery programs, as well as inner-city students who completed credit recovery courses through a traditional model, focusing on graduation rates.

This study found that students had a higher graduation rate in online credit recovery courses, while fewer students that completed traditional credit recovery graduated. Results suggest that online learning has the potential to decrease the number of dropouts in urban areas, allowing more students to successfully gain a high school diploma.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Dropout and graduation rates are crucial issues for all school districts in the United States. According to Glass and Rose (2008), students who drop out of school are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, become imprisoned and live unhealthy lifestyles. While several programs, from after-school programs to summer school programs to outside vendors such as 21st Century and Communities in Schools have all been tried to keep students from dropping out, no one method seems to stick. High dropout rates are a silent epidemic afflicting our entire nation, especially in high schools. The dropout epidemic in the United States disproportionately affects young people who are low-income, minority, urban youth attending large inner-city high schools. National research puts the graduation rate between 68% and 71%, which means that almost one-third of all public school students fail to graduate. According to *The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts* (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006), graduation and dropout rates are vary considerably by state and region of the country, sometimes by as much as 30 percentage points. And the dropout problem radiates beyond cities to suburbs, towns and rural areas. In 2003, 3.5 million youth between the ages of 16 to 25 did not have a high school diploma, nor were they working to gain one. There are nearly 2,000 high schools in the country with low graduation rates, concentrated in about 50 large cities, and in 15 primarily southern and southwestern states. This tragic cycle has not substantially improved during the past few decades when education reform has been so high on the public agenda. Some experts expect the dropout problem to increase significantly through 2020 unless significant improvements are made.

Now school districts are trying to discover innovative ways to retain students. “Innovative programs in high schools focus on non-traditional methods, such as virtual schooling, for retaining at-risk students and attracting those who dropped out of school” (HISD, p. 3). According to Barbour and Reeves (2009), the benefits of virtual schooling can be summarized into five main areas: expanding educational access, providing high-quality learning opportunities, improving student outcomes and skills, allowing for educational choice, and achieving administrative efficiency. Online learning programs and virtual schools offer formal educational instruction through learning resources that comprise a course of study via the Internet (Cavanaugh & Blomeyer, 2007). According to Yoh (2011):

There are countless ways to afford universal access to a K-12 education, whether a student seeks advanced learning, credit recovery, or remediation. Virtual schooling may be one of the most effective ways to reach at-risk students. Online learning has the ability to ensure that no child is ever left behind. (p. 1)

As education reform points out, the number of students who drop out of school every day is a shocking finding of the American public education system. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (NACOL) (2008) compares the drop-out dilemma to an epidemic; one that the American government must take note of and treat as the crisis that it is. Teachers working with inner-city, at-risk youth may be discouraged by their students’ boredom, lack of interest in school, and inability to make the connection between learning and success in life. All while being pressured by administrators, community leaders, parents and politicians to raise graduation rates. Too often, the pressure to do something conflicts with the need to actually teach students the

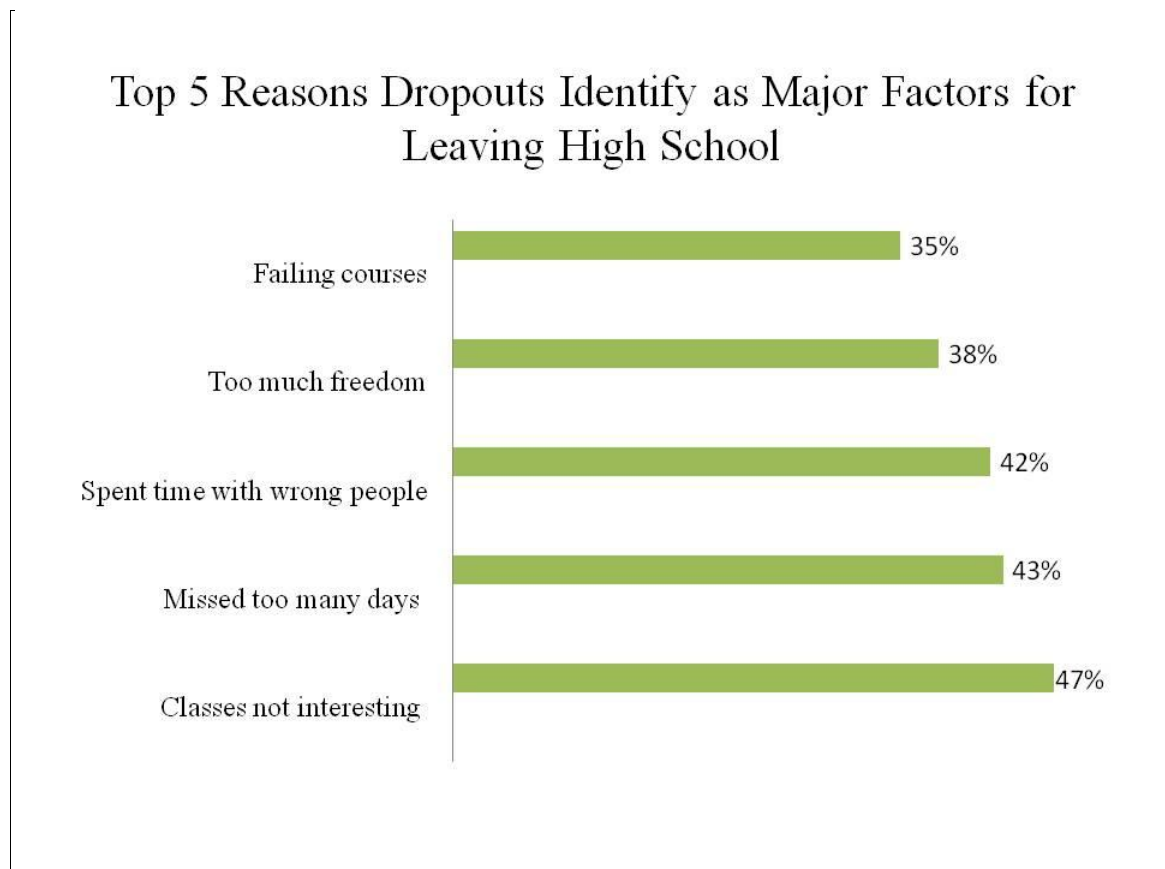
real skills they need to achieve success in education or life. Instead of challenging students to raise the bar to the level they must reach to be successful, too often, credit recovery techniques have lowered the performance for passing. Online programs for credit recovery are raising the bar of rigor for their students. Many teachers, principals and superintendents have realized that online courses can provide a different kind of learning environment, take advantage of differentiated instruction and challenge students to achieve at the levels at which they are capable. Students start to realize that credit recovery is not just summer school, worksheets, repetition and a chore; it is engaging and interesting (NACOL, 2008).

Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006) report that statistics of a high school dropout may surprise many people. Their study found that:

- 88 % had passing grades.
- 58 % dropped out with just two years or less to complete.
- 66 % would have worked harder if expectations were higher.
- 70 % were confident they could have graduated from high school.
- 81 % recognized that graduating from high school was vital to their success.
- 74 % would have stayed in school if they had to do it over again.
- 51 % accepted personal responsibility for not graduating.
- Nearly all those surveyed had ideas about what their schools could have done to keep them there. (NP)

These same students were asked why they dropped out if they understood the results would mean struggling in life. The figure below illustrates their reasons.

Figure 1-1 Top Five Reasons Students Drop Out

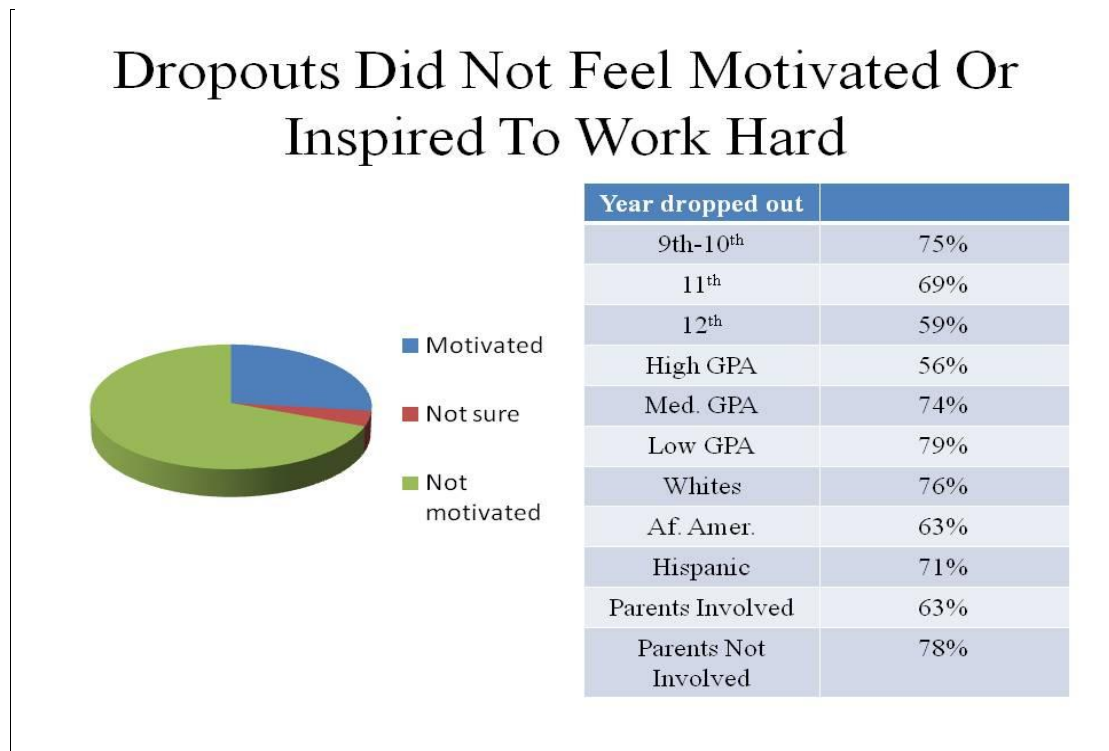


Considering that many of these former students understood the importance of education in fulfilling their goals and many had decent grades and only a few years to go, why did they choose to drop out? There is no single reason why. The decision to drop out is complex and relates to the individual student – and their family, school, and community. The decision is usually personal, reflects their life circumstances, and is part of the slow process of disengagement from school.

Studying the previous figure, students are most prone to dropping out of high school when they feel uninspired or not motivated to work hard. Many of these students

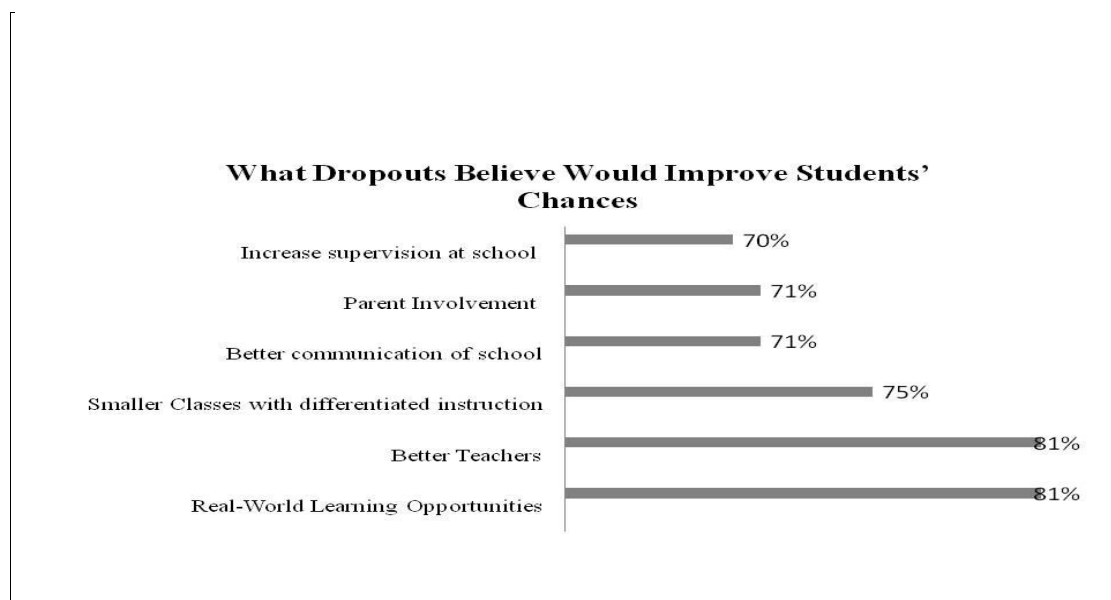
tend to find the lessons boring and that the “teacher just stood in front of the classroom and just talked and didn’t really like involve you” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 4). The figure below illustrates the perceptions of the high school dropout on their lack of motivation for the traditional classroom.

Figure 1-2 Dropout Perceptions



The graph illustrates that students may be more inclined to stay in school if their 21st century needs were being met. In addition to students not feeling involved in their learning, they also have suggestions on what would improve their chances of staying in school. Figure 1-3 below demonstrates their thoughts.

Figure 1-3 What Dropouts Believe Would Improve Students' Chance of Staying in School



This figure solidifies the idea that students want differentiated instruction and more involvement with their own learning. The creation of Graduation Labs may answer the call of reaching inner-city, at-risk drop-outs.

Purpose of the Study

In 2009 the state of Texas ranked its dropout rate at 2.4%, while the district in Southeast Texas ranked theirs higher at 3.7%. Needless to say, something needed to be done for this dropout rate to decrease. In January 2010, the district implemented an Online Credit Recovery Initiative (OCRI) that subsequently became known as the Graduation Lab or Grad Lab. The APEX Credit Recovery Initiative method provides a specific digital plan for academic instruction. This initiative serves as an alternative method for students who need to complete their credit requirements for graduation. Currently, in the school district studied, the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative is a district-wide initiative that began in January 2010. This initiative placed computer labs with

special APEX learning software at 46 high school campuses as well as graduation coaches at 27 of these campuses. The first semester of the initiative focused on senior high school students who required credit recovery courses in order to meet graduation requirements. The goal was to expand the APEX Learning curriculum over time to include credit opportunities for other types of students. The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of the Grad Lab has brought about a significant change in the number of dropouts in this district.

Significance of the Study

What can be done to effectively engage and educate students that are at-risk of dropping out of high school? According to Legters, McDill, and McPartland (1994) this question has been a central concern of many educators over the past three decades and has given rise to the vast number of strategies and programs designed to:

1. Provide extra help to chronic underachievers.
2. Equalize distribution of educational resources and opportunities.

Too often students participate in a particular program and make significant academic and/or behavioral improvements, only to have these gains faded-out when a new initiative is brought in or the student moves on to another grade or school. Another observation is that programs do not educate the whole-child. They tend to focus on one area of weakness for the student, such as math or reading. The online credit recovery initiative looks to differentiate instruction for all at-risk students and make it possible to gain deficient credits on their own time. This program explicitly addresses the student as a whole person with a variety of complex needs and experiences, all of which have some impact, positive or negative, on his or her drive to stay in school or drop out.

Our communities and nation suffer from the drop-out epidemic due to the loss of productive workers and the high cost associated with increased incarceration, health care and social services. This tragic dilemma has not significantly improved over the last decade. The public needs to be made aware of the severity of the problem.

Online credit recovery has become quite main-stream with the increasing use of technology in the classrooms. Students are able to receive supplemental learning opportunities through online coursework in many of this southeast district's schools. Given that a large amount of money is allocated to fund the program, it is important to determine if the program is viable. This study provides more insight to the benefits of online learning as it relates to high school dropouts. It determines if the time, effort and money spent on an online credit recovery program is effective in lowering the drop-out rate of large urban districts. For the purpose of this study, a large urban school district in the southeast region of Texas will be studied to determine if their dropout prevention method of online credit recovery has succeeded for their at-risk population. This district sits on the cutting edge of education by making digital curriculum, like APEX learning, available to students via the Grad Lab. This new approach could increase graduation rates and allow more students to achieve academic success. Although K-12 online learning programs have evolved and grown over the past decade, there are a limited amount of published research and evaluations focusing on virtual schooling practices (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Evaluating program outcomes allows administrators, teachers, and parents to make the best decisions for educating students within the district.

Definition of Terms

- **Apex:** The online program that the district utilizes for online credit. Apex Learning partners with school districts to provide solutions tailored to meet their specific educational objectives. They are accredited by the Northwest Accreditation Commission and its courses are approved for National Collegiate Athletic Association eligibility (www.apexlearning.com).
- **At-Risk:** Any student meeting one or more of the following criteria are classified as being “at-risk”: (1) The student qualifies for free or reduced lunch; (2) The student qualifies as an ESL or Bilingual student; (3) The student has ever failed a course or grade level; (4) The student is pregnant or a parent; or (5) The student has ever been placed in a Discipline Alternative Education Program (DAEP). These qualifications are based on the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) definition of at-risk students for the State of Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2009). In addition, Watson and Gemin (2008) define at-risk as “a student who will exit his or her K-12 education before successfully completing it. These students may drop out, flunk out, be pushed out, or ‘age out’ of school, but the impact on them and on society is the same” (NP).
- **Chancery Student Management System (Chancery):** a Web-based student information system schools use to input student attendance, courses completed, courses failed, courses recovered, and other online courses taken from other vendors.
- **Completion Rate:** in 1996, TEA investigated using a high school completion rate as an alternative or supplement to annual dropout rates in the accountability

system. This measure serves as a complement to the dropout rate and provides an indicator for success rather than failure (Texas Education Agency, 1996).

- **Continuer:** A student is classified as a continuer if he or she is not a graduate and is reported as enrolled in the Texas public school system in the fall after his or her anticipated graduation. For example, for a student to be counted as a continuer in the class of 2011 four-year rates, he or she must have been enrolled in the fall of 2011 (Texas Education Agency, 2011).
- **Credit Recovery (CR):** refers to a student passing, and receiving credit for, a course that the student previously attempted but was unsuccessful in earning academic credits towards graduation. Credit recovery often differs from “first time credit” in that the students have already satisfied seat time requirements for the course in which they were unsuccessful, and can focus on earning credit based on competency of the content standards for the particular course. Credit recovery programs, in general, have a primary focus of helping students stay in school and graduate on time (Watson & Gemin, 2008).
- **Distance education or learning:** Any array of courses that are outside of a traditional classroom, such as correspondence courses, online, video, teleconferences, or via Internet (Bruce, 1999).
- **General Education Development certificate recipient:** GED tests are given at 132 centers throughout the state in school districts, colleges, universities, and education service centers. Tests are given year-round and results are transmitted electronically to the TEA. Receipt of a GED certificate is reported as soon as the test is passed. A student in the class of 2011 is assigned a final status of GED

certificate recipient if he or she is not a graduate, is not a continuer, and has not received a certificate by August 31, 2011 (TEA, 2011).

- **Graduate:** A student is classified as a graduate in the year in which he or she is reported in PEIMS as a graduate from the Texas public school system. The student may have graduated in any of the years the cohort was in school. For example, for a student to be counted as a graduate in the class of 2011 four-year rates, a student may have graduated in 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, or 2010-11 (TEA, 2011).
- **Graduation Coach (Grad Coach):** Used to identify at-risk students as early as ninth grade and develop intervention plans to keep them on track to four-year graduation.
- **Graduation Lab (Grad Lab):** Online Credit Recovery Initiative computer labs that allow students to work on credit recovery software.
- **High School Dropout:**

A student who is enrolled in public schools in Grades 7-12, does not return to public school the following fall, is not expelled, and does not: graduate, receive a GED, continue school outside the public school system, begin college, or die. (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d., NP)
- **Online Credit Recovery Initiative (OCRI):** Online coursework that allow students to recover credits in non-traditional classroom settings.
- **Online Learning:** “Any class that offers its entire curriculum in the online course delivery mode, thereby allowing students to participate regardless of geographic location, independent of time and place” (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995).

- **Original Credit (OC):** Any course that a high school student will take in the Grad Lab and has not taken and received a grade for.
- **Public Education Information and Management System (PEIMS):** the statewide data collection and reporting system operated by the Texas Education Agency, which includes extensive information on students. It serves as the information database for many statewide reports on public education, such as the Academic Excellence Indicator System.
- **Seat:** A seat is filled by a student enrolled in and actively working on a course in the online environment.
- **Student Achievement:** the degree to which students meet or surpass the minimum standards of knowledge and skills that the state of Texas establishes for public schools and measures by means of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (Texas Education Agency, 2012).
- **Teacher of Record (TOR):** A teacher that grades the written coursework throughout the program including the final exam. The teachers must be certified in the grade and subject matter by the state of Texas for which he or she is the Teacher of Record.
- **Texas Education Agency (TEA):** the state of Texas governing body that:
provides leadership, guidance, and resources to help schools meet the educational needs of all students. Located in Austin, TX, TEA is the administrative unit for primary and secondary public education. Under the leadership of the commissioner of education, the agency manages the textbook adoption process, oversees development of the statewide

curriculum, administers the statewide assessment program, administers a data collection system on public school students, staff and finances, rates school districts under the statewide accountability system, operates research and information programs, monitors for compliance with federal guidelines and serves as a fiscal agent for the distribution of state and federal funds. (TEA, 2012)

- **Traditional Classroom:** Any classroom that is taught face to face with student(s) and a teacher.

Research Questions

1. Does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school drop-out rate of inner-city, at-risk youth?
2. Since inception, has the online credit recovery initiative accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements?

Limitations

The inception of the online learning for credit recovery initiative for public high school students is very new. As a result, the research for some programs is very limited. There are very few studies that have researched online credit recovery and if it positively affects the high school graduation rate. The Independent School District (ISD) that has implemented the new program does run data at the end of every school year, but this data has yet to be interpreted. In addition, by relying on the Chancery database for the APEX Online Credit Recovery Initiative, it is possible that students served after the data were extracted were not captured in this study. This study will provide feedback for at-risk students in a large urban district. However, generalizations possibly may not be fully

comparable to every district in Texas. The results will be applicable to inner-city, at-risk youth in urban districts.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Background Study of the Problem

As skill and assessment expectations have increased at almost every employment and educational point so has the need for a high school diploma. Teenagers' dropping out of high school before completion has been a challenge for educators, parents, and employers for at least 30 years (Haycock & Huang 2001). Even as facts have become known, graduating from high school has remained problematic for many public school students – particularly male students from low-income or ethnic minority families (Dillow 2003).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics:

- The status dropout rate declined from 14 % in 1980 to 8 % in 2009.
- A significant part of this decline occurred between 2000 and 2009 (from 11 % to 8 %).
- Status dropout rates and changes in these rates over time differed by race/ethnicity.
- The status dropout rates for Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics each declined between 1980 and 2009.
- Each year during that period, the status dropout rate was lower for Whites and Blacks than for Hispanics.
- The rate for Asians/Pacific Islanders was lower than that for Hispanics and Blacks every year between 1989 and 2009.

- Although the gaps between the rates of Blacks and Whites, Hispanics and Whites, and Hispanics and Blacks have decreased, the decreases occurred in different time periods.
- The Black-White gap narrowed during the 1980s, with no measurable change between 1990 and 2009.
- In contrast, the Hispanic-Black gaps narrowed between 1990 and 2009, with no measurable change in the gap during the 1980s.
- The Hispanic-White gap narrowed between 2000 and 2009, with no measurable change in the gap between 1980 and 1999. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2011, NP)

According to the Texas Education Agency, Texas is a recognized national leader in tackling the dropout problem. While the NCEA lists the national dropout rate for 2009 at 8.1%, Texas is below that at 2.4% in Grades 9-12. This number may sound significantly lower, but 33,235 students dropping out of a Texas high school each year is far too many. According to 2009-2010 Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data, of the 4,847,844 students enrolled in Texas, there are 2,283,490 at-risk students in danger of not completing a high school diploma (PEIMS Student Report Data, 2010). In 2010, Texas allocated approximately \$259 million to initiate a Dropout Recovery Pilot Program (DRPP) to identify and recruit students who have already dropped out of Texas public schools with the intent to provide them with services that will enable them to earn a high school diploma (Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program, 2010). At-risk students are the focus of this study due to the fact that the goal of the Texas Education Agency is to provide leadership, guidance and resources to help

schools meet the educational needs of all students (TEA website). Particularly, in the Southeast region of Texas, a large district started its own Dropout Recovery Intervention Program (DRIP) in order to target dropouts in their district. The committee is on every high school campus in the district and consists of campus personnel. The cost of leaving high school without a degree is staggering, and the value of gaining a high school diploma to the student is equally large. NACOL (2008) describes a student in a credit recovery program in Kansas that was expelled from school three times. The student came back, became engaged in his online courses and mentors, and not only gained his high school diploma, but was working towards an Associate's degree. This student went from the prospect of earning \$23,400 annually without a high school diploma, to the likelihood of earning \$38,200 a year with an Associate's degree. The Table below depicts the earnings of students that earn a diploma to those that do not.

Table 2-1 Lifetime Income Based on Degree Earned

Annual Income		Lifetime Income	
Bachelor's Degree	\$52,200	Bachelor's Degree	\$1,667,700
Associate's Degree	\$38,200	Associate's Degree	\$1,269,850
Some College	\$36,800	HS Graduate	\$994,080
HS Graduate	\$30,400	No HS Diploma	\$630,000
No HS Diploma	\$23,400		

Dropout Data

According to the TEA (2011) in the 2007-2008 school year, 356,183 students began Grade 9 in Texas public schools. Over the next three years, 22,589 students who entered the Texas public school system were added to the 2007-2008 Grade 9 cohort. Another 53,538 students left the system for reasons other than graduating, receiving General Education Development (GED) certificates, or dropping out. By the fall semester following spring 2011 anticipated graduation date for the cohort, 319,588 students had been assigned one of four final statuses: graduate, continuer, GED recipient, or dropout. Students with final statuses made up the class of 2011. The final statuses for 5,646 students could not be determined because of data errors. Data errors can result from missing student records or misreported student identification information. The underreported rate is the percentage of students in Grades 7-12 who attend in one school year and are not accounted for the next fall.

In an age of data-driven accountability, it is hard to imagine being surprised by a statistic, especially a basic piece of information that we think we already know. As states public schools in neglected inner-city areas have been brought into an increasingly unflattering light. As it turns out, graduation rates are lower than previously thought, probably much lower. If asked to guess the graduation rate in the nation's public schools, the conventional wisdom would suggest a figure in the neighborhood of 85 %. For decades, in fact, commonly-reported statistics from the Current Population Survey and Census would have pointed to an answer in that range. Databases such as these are readily available and well-known, which have made them attractive sources of information. At the same time, however, it is important to note that statistics from these

sources typically capture the characteristics of the general young adult population (e.g., age 18 to 24) rather than those of students who are attending or have recently left public schools. In addition, estimates from such population-based data sources are not able to produce reliable annual estimates below the regional level, cannot readily distinguish between public and private school students, and may reflect the educational attainment of young adults who no longer live in the place where they attended, graduated from, or dropped out of high school. Consequently, population statistics are ill-suited for measuring the performance of public education systems, which is now a primary concern under NCLB. A much more optimistic picture emerges from a recent wave of reports based on data derived directly from the actual public school systems being held accountable under No Child Left Behind. For example, research from the Urban Institute suggests that today slightly more than two-thirds of public high school students nationwide receive a diploma. Even more disturbing is the finding that little more than one-half of students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups finish high school (Swanson, 2004). The situation appears to be even more dire for students in our nation's largest high poverty urban districts, where as few as one-third of all students graduate. In these places, completion rates among certain disadvantaged groups of students are often lower still.

TEA (2011) reports that annual dropout rates reported by different organizations may differ because of several reasons and this will in turn affect the dropout data of schools. The reasons include:

- Different grade levels are included in the calculation.
- Dropouts are defined and counted differently.

- Total student counts are taken at different times of the school year.
- The data systems employed provide different levels of precision.

Not all students from the previous year are accounted for through district records or TEA processing. For example, a district may fail to submit a record for a student. Or a district may submit a record, but an error in the student's identification information on the record prevents TEA from matching the record to a student. Students from the previous year who are not accounted for or for who a record cannot be matched are considered underreported. Districts with high numbers or percentages of underreported students, high numbers or percentages of data errors, or abnormal use of certain leaver codes are subject to interventions or sanctions from TEA. If these instances occur a district's accountability rating could be lowered.

An annual dropout rate measures what happens in a school, district, or state during one school year and can be considered a measure of annual performance. Because it is based on a mathematical operation and requires data for only one school year, it has the greatest potential to produce accurate rates that are comparable across states, districts, or schools. Dropout rates can also be calculated for student groups based on demographic characteristics (race/ethnicity, economic status, gender), special program participation (ESL, special education), or other factors (grade level, at-risk, overage for grade). This makes an annual dropout rate a practical tool to help educators determine who is dropping out and narrowing down why. All of this is essential information for developing dropout prevention and credit recovery programs. On the other hand, because annual dropout rates uses data from only one year, it produces the lowest dropout rate of any of the methods. There is growing concern that reporting low dropout rates may

understate the severity of the dropout problem. To try and eliminate dropout errors, districts are required to submit enrollment records for students who return and leaver records from students who do not return through PEIMS. The *PEIMS Data Standards* provides detailed reporting requirements, data element definitions and TEA contact information.

The actual dropout rate in American public schools is perhaps as high as 32%. For poor and minority students, the disparity in graduation rates (perhaps 50% or higher) is unconscionable (Swanson, 2004). Attaining reliable data on the number of students who drop out of school, especially the number of poor and minority students is a persistent challenge with No Child Left Behind. A recent report by the Urban Institute found that “contrary to published reports of a national graduation rate of 85%, minority students (many of whom are poor) have little more than a 50/50 chance of earning a diploma” (Swanson, 2004). The Institute reported that nearly one-third of all students fail to graduate. In Swanson’s (2004) article *The Real Truth about Low Graduation Rates, An Evidence Based Commentary*, he states, “Beleaguered school officials might feel so pressured to raise test scores that pushing low-performing students out of school would seem like the best way to boost their numbers” (NP). Unfortunately, he goes on, “the reasons that dropouts go uncounted range from deliberate falsification of data to the genuine difficulties in tracking a student who leaves school” (Swanson, 2004, p. 36). This task is especially difficult with poor and minority students from families that move often; however, it is clear that high dropout rates are not the result of increased assessment and accountability. “A number of recent studies have documented that increased accountability does not directly increase the number of students leaving

school” (Greene & Winters, 2004; Education Trust, 2003d; Swanson, 2004).

Undeniably one of the most insidious actions of school districts is encouraging students to drop out or altering school dropout data and reports. Suddenly, large groups of students are “transferring” to other school districts or choosing home-schooling. “In some school districts, low achieving students have been pushed to enroll in GED programs, charter schools, or even referred to overnight high school diploma schools. This is all in an effort to “remove these students from the assessment pool” (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 15).

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2009) notes that for the vast majority of dropouts leaving school is not a hasty or impulsive decision. Rather, it is made gradually in response to a growing disengagement from school, falling behind in core subject areas due to missing too many classes, and feeling academically unprepared to handle high school classes. However, research shows that most dropouts are confident that they could have made it through high school if they had tried—and if the expectations and academic standards at their schools had been higher (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In fact, many teens report being encouraged by administrators or teachers to stop coming to school. Some researchers see evidence of a “push-out” syndrome in many schools, where teachers and administrators make little effort to hold onto potential dropouts (Druian & Butler, 2001).

In some cases, accountability systems associated with No Child Left Behind mandates may lead schools to “push out” students who are not performing well in classes and on standardized tests (Losen, 2008). In some districts, disciplinary policies require schools to suspend or expel students who miss too many days (Stearns & Glennie, 2006). School districts with high dropout rates should review disciplinary policies, especially those guiding expulsions, with a view toward making expulsion a very rare event. From the

standpoint of dropout prevention, in-school suspension is preferable to out-of-school suspension, especially if the time is used productively (Bost & Klare, 2007).

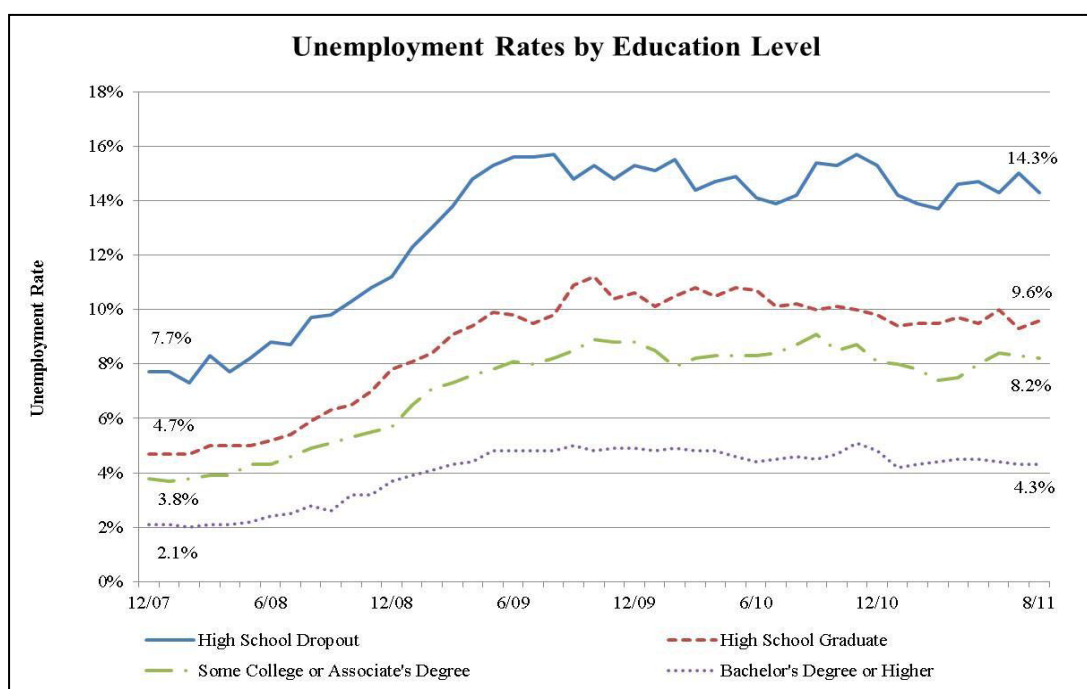
Some students have failed the fifth-grade three times and have consequently been retained in elementary school. Since most districts do not allow teenagers to attend elementary school, after three years in the fifth grade, the students are reassigned to the eighth grade. Inevitably, almost all of the students drop out of high school, usually as early as the ninth grade. “It has been estimated that as of 2004 in one of the nation’s largest urban districts, more than 50,000 students have been retained because of barrier testing policies. Most of these students will likely drop out of school and join the growing numbers of uneducated, hopeless urban American youth” (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p.15).

Future of a High School Drop Out

The federal government, as well as several private institutions, has conducted studies in order to attempt to follow what typically happens to a high school student after he or she drops out. The gap between dropouts and more educated people is widening as opportunities for higher skilled workers all but disappear for the less skilled. Dropouts will earn \$200,000 less than high school graduates and over \$800,000 less than college graduates in their lives. Strikingly, dropouts make up nearly half of the heads of households on welfare and nearly half the prison population. Specifically in Texas, demographer Steve Murdock says that the trend line shows “three in every 10 workers not having a high school education by 2040” (Murdock, 2010, NP). “The state’s public schools have more and more low-income kids and persistently high dropout rates – and unless that changes, the future of Texas will contain more long – term unemployment and

poverty – and more folks depending on food stamps, Medicaid and CHIP. Higher incarceration rates also can be expected” (Murdoch, 2010, NP). When looking at these numbers, it is important to ask yourself would you want a high school dropout living in your neighborhood. It is also important to note that there is increasingly a huge gap between the high school dropout and those that earn their GED, both in the ability to find a job and in earned wages.

Figure 2-1 Unemployment Rates by Education Levels



Source: US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011

The graph shows that the unemployment rate for individuals of all education levels skyrocketed since December 2007, but high school dropouts have dealt with most difficulty in finding a job. According to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts in August 2011 – four years after the

start of the recession – was 14.3 % compared to 9.6 % for high school graduates, 8.2 % for people with some college education, and 4.3 % for persons with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Furthermore, the future of a high school dropout during an economic recession is bleak. More often than not, college graduates are taking jobs that would have once been considered for only those without a degree. Thus, high school graduates are taking positions that are often left for those without a GED or diploma. Therefore, high school dropouts become the bottom of the barrel during a country's economic hardship. The Alliance for Excellent Education states that "since the economic recession began in December 2007, the national unemployment rate has gone from 5 % to 9.1 % in August 2011" (November 2011, p 1). The graph above shows that all educated individuals have suffered from the recession, but "high school dropouts have faced the most difficulty in finding a job" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). If the nation's secondary schools improved enough that they were able to graduate all of their students, rather than the 70 % of students that are currently graduated annually (Editorial Projects in Education, 2007), the payoff would be significant. For instance, if the students who dropped out of the class of 2007 had graduated, the nation's economy would have benefited from an additional \$329 billion in income over their lifetimes.

Research presented by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2009) states that the costs of dropping out have always been high, but never higher than today. Over the past three decades, people without a high school diploma have seen an absolute decline in real income and have dropped further behind individuals with more education. The result is a pattern of increased economic marginalization for those Americans with the least

education. Recent studies show that between the ages of 18 and 64, dropouts, on average, earn some \$400,000 less than high school graduates. For males, the differential is even higher—\$485,000 (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). While dropouts who subsequently complete the requirements for a General Education Diploma (GED) fare better than those who do not, their earning capacity is nevertheless lower than graduates with high school diplomas (Caputo, 2005). As the report from the Center for Labor Market Studies concludes, “The costs of dropping out of high school today are substantial and have risen over time, especially for young men, who find it almost impossible to earn an adequate income to take care of themselves and their families” (Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009, p. 2).

According to the TEA there are over 1,200 school districts in the state of Texas. Trends show that school districts with large numbers of low-income students have higher dropout rates. Large school districts, where low-income students make up at least 80 % of the enrollment, have dropout rates of 50 % or more. In Phi Delta Kappa, Gleibermann (2007) states:

In previous generations we did not worry about everyone reading at grade level or about having 100% graduation rates. We did not equate dropping out with being left behind. The young people who could not make it in one-size-fits-all system could pursue vocational education or work in a factory or on a farm. But today, in a society where almost all living-wage jobs require a high school education, we demand that everyone be competent. (p. 23)

However, Gleibermann(2007) also notes that “our school system is based on a 19th century factory model that cycles 150 students a day through a teacher’s classroom, a

process never intended to ensure all students achieve high-level skills' (p. 20).

Considering that retention does not work, districts have begun to take a more 21st century approach to dropouts (Siegel & Bruno, 1986). If poor and minority students are to learn effectively and not be left behind, schools and communities must demonstrate an unwavering determination to gather accurate dropout data, close the achievement gap between various student groups, and close the high school graduation gap (Gehring, 2004).

History of Education

A major part of American history has been the journey for democracy and equality. However, according to Joel Spring (2007) dating back to the arrival of English settlers, American society has been plagued with racism and demands for equality. Spring states that “violence and racism are a basic part of American history and of the history of the school” (p. 6). Schooling has been plagued by scenes of violence, including:

- Urban riots between Protestants and Catholics in the nineteenth century.
- The punishment of enslaved Africans for learning to read.
- Racial clashes over the education of African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans.
- Riots and killings over immigration of schools from the 1950s to the 1970s (Spring, 2007, p. 6).

“How is it possible to argue that public schooling is the backbone of democracy but still engage in discriminatory and racist educational practices?” (Spring, 2007, p.404).

In the Nineteenth Century, America attempted to end poverty, provide equal opportunities, and increase national wealth by founding common schools. “These

grandiose claims continued into the twentieth century with a strong emphasis on schools selecting students and preparing them for different segments of the labor market” (Spring, 2007, p.229). In the 1960s, the educational reform continued with programs such as Head Start and compensatory programs in math and reading. Throughout American history, educational reform and equality has been a constant battle, but no one fix has seemed to secure all American’s an equal opportunity at education.

In terms of the history of education, “schools have assumed tasks previously performed by the family as educational responsibilities have shifted from the parents to the schoolteacher” (Spring, 2007, p.404). Despite the idea of a high school model having early beginnings, it did not become a “mass institution until the 1920s and 1930s” (Spring, 2007). Regardless of confusion during this time as to the exact purpose of high schools, arguments supporting the establishment included “promoting the idea that achievement depends on individual responsibility and that high schools would contribute to reduction of crime by instilling basic moral values” (Spring, 2007, p.404). These basic moral values and establishment of achievement have been enthralled in debate since the beginning of the American educational system. Because all Americans have not been considered equal for hundreds of years, the achievement gap between Whites, African Americans and Hispanics have continued to grow. An abundance of national movements have been continuously tried with each new presidency but nothing has proven to be effective. In 1983, during President Reagan’s tenure, *A Nation at Risk* was published. Its publication is considered a landmark event in modern American educational history. “Among other things, the report contributed to the ever-growing sense that American schools are failing and it touched off a wave of local, state, and federal reform efforts” in

closing the achievement gaps” (Kosar, 2011, NP). A year later, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 72, which mandated sweeping reforms in the state’s public education system. According to TEA (2011), the bill, among other changes, increased graduation requirements, established a minimum competency testing program with an exit-level test for graduation, prohibited social promotion, limited the number of permissible absences, and linked participation in extracurricular activities to academic standards with a “no pass/no play” policy. HB72 also addressed high school dropouts. The 1984 legislation authorized the TEA to reduce the statewide longitudinal dropout rate to no more than 5 % [TEC] § 11.205, 1986). At the same time, the bill directed the then Texas Department of Community Affairs (TDCA) to assess the state’s dropout problem and its effect on the Texas economy. In response to the report and to growing concerns about dropouts, Texas legislature passed HB 1010 in 1987 (Frazer, Nichols, & Wilkinson, 1991). HB 1010 substantially increased the state and local responsibilities for collecting student dropout information, monitoring dropout rates, and providing dropout reduction services (TEC §§11.205-11.207, 1988). HB 1010 also required TEA to establish a statewide dropout information clearinghouse and to form a council to coordinate policies and resources for dropouts and at-risk students. HB1010 also required school districts to designate one or more at-risk coordinators and to provide remedial and support programs to those students at-risk for dropping out of high school.

Moving into the 21st century, and the Bush presidency, the federal government has brought change in the assessment and national rankings of public schools with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In 2010, the United States Department of Education published *A Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary*

Education Act, commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind. This act explores the nation's priorities as they pertain to educational reform and student achievement, building on 2009's American Recovery and Investment Act which focused on

1. Improving teacher and principal effectiveness.
2. Family involvement and investment.
3. College-and career readiness standards.
4. Intensive support and intervention for struggling students (United States Department of Education, 2010).

“With the enactment of the No Child Left Behind federal legislation in 2002, the United States became the first nation to establish a national goal of all students attaining proficiency in reading, math, and science” (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p.48). With the implementation of NCLB, more emphasis has been placed on student achievement in the areas of standardized tests, in order to close the achievement gap between students of different ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, and genders (NCLB, 2002). The act demands that schools meet higher accountability standards. Under NCLB, the state and all public school districts and campuses are evaluated annually for adequate yearly progress (AYP). AYP statuses were assigned to districts and campuses for the first time in the summer of 2003. Graduation rate is an additional indicator for high schools and districts offering Grade 12. To achieve a label of *Meets AYP*, a district or campus must meet an absolute graduation rate standard or meet an improvement requirement on the graduation rate calculated for designated student groups. For 2011 AYP evaluations (TEA 2011), the graduation rate standards for all students were:

- Four-year graduation rate goal of 90.0 %.

- Four-year graduation rate target of 75.0 %.
- Four-year graduation rate alternatives of safe harbor or improvement targets.
- Five-year graduation rate target of 80.0 %.

Summer School

Joel Spring (2007) describes the “establishment of summer, or vacation, school as another means of extending the influence of the school over children’s lives” (p. 229). In 1872 Cambridge, Massachusetts was one of the first states to propose the idea of summer school. Officials argued that summer was “a time of idleness, often of crime, with many who are left to roam the streets, with no friendly hand to guide them, save that of the police” (Spring, 2007, p.229). The superintendent in Cambridge argued that summer school should be used as an inexpensive form of police control. In his report of 1897, he wrote:

The value of these schools consists not so much in what shall be learned during the few weeks they are in session, as in the fact that no boy or girl shall be left with unoccupied time. Idleness is an opportunity for evil-doing...these schools will cost money. Reform schools also cost money. (Spring, 2007)

The idea of summer school took off, with parents knocking down doors to enroll their children. Towards the late 1900s, summer school began incorporating credit recovery courses for students to make up during the summer months. Now students who used to skip home from school and shout with glee were looking at summer school as a punishment (Spring, 2005, p. 230). Courses that needed to be taken during summer school for credit recovery came at a cost to the parents. Students then took the courses and the summer school program seriously. After payment for credit recovery phased out

during summer months, campuses found it hard to force students to attend summer school. Students, therefore, began the following school year with deficient credits and likely behind their cohort. Again, schools were dealt the daunting task of engaging these at-risk youth and creating programs that kept them in school as well as kept them on schedule to graduate with their respective cohort.

History of Online Learning

Public K-12 schools in the United States utilize online learning. Some environments take place in traditional classrooms, while others allow students to attend classes from home or other locations. Online learning is

Increasingly being utilized by students who may not want to go to the traditional brick and mortar schools due to severe allergies or other medical issues, fear of school violence and school bullying and students whose parents would like to homeschool but do not feel qualified. (Wikipedia.org)

There are more and more states that are utilizing virtual school platforms for online learning. Virtual schools allow students to log into learning courses anywhere there is an Internet connection. According to John Reid, Ph.D:

Virtual education is the study of credit and non-credit courses from world-wide remote sites that are neither bound by time or physical location. In essence, a student hooks up with other students and an instructor in both real and virtual time. Whether in a plane comfortably cruising at 33,000 feet, or at home, at any given moment a student can log into a virtual classroom. From desktop or laptop, email assignments can be sent and received. Study, research, discovery and a new

knowledge are at a student's fingertips. It is here that the student's enthusiasm level is piqued. (Reid, 2010, NP)

Online Learning and the Creation of the Grad Lab

Technology is often linked to educational options and today, new technologies are changing the delivery and experience of education at all levels of education. Online educational options are available from the elementary to college level. Online learning can be defined as "education where instruction and content are delivered primarily via the Internet" (Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon 2004, p. 5). Different types of Internet-based, online, and virtual high schools now exist, including statewide virtual high schools, university-based high schools, regionally-based virtual schools, local education agency-based virtual schools, charter school options, private virtual schools, and vendors of online curricula, content, tools and infrastructure (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark 2009). Internet-based education is expanding and reaching more students in more locations and providing more options for learning. New information technologies influence traditional campus-based instruction. As these new options for learning emerge, the move to computer-based learning raises issues for addressing student success and achievement (Watson, et al., 2004). In the United States, digital education for elementary and secondary students can be a solution to educational problems, including crowded schools, a shortage of secondary courses, a lack of access to qualified teachers, and accommodating students who need to learn at a different pace or in a place different from a school classroom (Cavanaugh, 2009). Because of digital solutions to these issues, K-12 distance and digital education programs are developing rapidly. K-12 online course enrollments have exceeded other educational formats in recent years (Setzer & Lewis,

2005). Online learning is any type of education that refers to Internet or computer-based instruction (Watson, Gemin, Ryan, & Wick, 2009). There are different types of virtual schools: state-sanctioned, state level, college/university based, regionally based, virtual charter schools, and for-profit providers. Credit recovery is often meant as a type of online learning that students can utilize Internet programs to regain credits in courses that they have previously been unsuccessful in. A large number of students today, many of whom are at-risk of dropping out, can work to gain deficient credits through online courses. With this new concept of learning comes a new breed of teachers. Ten years ago the Graduation Coach position did not exist. With the creation of online learning, certified educators are able to become more of a facilitator to student learning rather than a teacher. The Graduation Lab in the said district is set up as a computer lab. Ideally, students are able to come in and lounge as they work on laptops, possibly sitting in bean bags or couches. The superintendent feels that this lax learning environment will encourage more students to want to be a part of the lab, thus earning deficient credits.

Many students do not have the self-discipline needed to complete online courses independently, without the assistance of provided in an environment such as the Grad Lab along with the guidance of a Graduation Coach. Self-pacing in this case could actually be detrimental, leading to procrastination. As noted by Clark, Lewis, Oyer, and Schreiber (2002), students most successful in virtual schools include highly motivated, self-disciplined, and independent learners with good abilities in writing, reading, and technology. Students, as well as teachers, need buy-in in order for the Grad Labs to be successful.

New methods of conceptualizing the relationship between student and school allow non-traditional teaching methods to influence student learning and provide new opportunities for high school success and completion. The current shift in pedagogical approaches promotes new theoretical frameworks to expanding learning options for students. This framework brings available, current technology to students via online learning, digital curriculum, virtual schools, and Internet-based learning. Understanding new alternative instructional options make it possible to individualize instruction to meet specific student needs and thus improve educational outcomes.

Motivating Factors for Dropping Out of High School

Several things are correlated with student reasons for dropping out. Some examples include, lack of parental support, insecurity, poverty, and teenage pregnancy. Willis (2006) believes that if students are engaged in school and excited in the classroom, they will be less likely to become a drop out. According to Fortier, Guay and Vallerand (1997), the high school drop-out represents an important problem that affects more than 30 % of students each year. In the present paper, the role that lack of motivation plays in the student drop-out is investigated. It is hypothesized that students with low motivational levels have a higher chance of dropping out than those with higher motivational levels. The following two literature reviews attempt to demonstrate and support the hypothesis.

Fortier, Guay, and Vallerand (1997) conducted a study to investigate what factors are involved in dropping out of high school. They were interested in finding out if the factors were intrinsically or extrinsically motivated. First, Fortier et al. (1997) administered a questionnaire to almost 4,500 9th and 10th grade students, that were, on

average, 15 years old. The questionnaire contained items that allowed the examination of how students perceived different social agents, educational motivators, academic motivation and future schooling intentions. A year later, the researchers went back to the school district and established who the student drop outs were. They compared the information obtained from the previous questionnaire to those that had dropped out. They found that the “most important forms of motivation for participants in their sample were, in decreasing order, identified regulation, external regulation, introjected regulation, intrinsic knowledge, intrinsic accomplishment, intrinsic stimulation, and motivation” (Fortier, et al., 1997, p. 1165). The results showed that “motivation, and more specifically, self-determined motivation (or lack of it), leads to important real-life outcomes, such as dropping out of high school” (Fortier et.al., 1997, p. 1169). Interestingly enough, Fortier et al. (1997) found that female students have higher levels of intrinsic motivation than do males and males are at a higher risk of dropping out than their female counterparts.

Willis (2006), in her research, studied the strategies that can engage student learning in the classroom and move them closer to not dropping out of high school. She finds that scientific research can be used to benefit effective focusing, active learning, connecting and retrieval of learned information in the brain (Willis, 2006). Willis started her career as a neuroscientist and transitioned into a classroom teacher. She has used her years of experience from both, to explore the effects that motivation has on a student and school. In her studies she found that stress, related to school, releases a chemical called Trimethyltin, which can cause cell disruption (Willis, 2006, p. 59). Thus, Willis (2006) believes, students will become stressed in the classroom and school environment, which

can ultimately lead to dropping out. Willis states that “the prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to mature. This brain region is the center for emotional stability, moral reasoning, judgment, and executive functions such as concentration, planning, and making wise decisions” (Willis, 2006, p. 67). She believes that school should be a safe zone for students. With the student not having the full development of the prefrontal cortex, adults should be the guiding factor in assuring that a student does not become disconnected from school. If a student lacks certain motivational factors, such as, teacher support, he or she could be at a higher risk for dropping out. In research that has studied the perspectives of teachers and principals on the dropout epidemic, Bridgeland, et al. (2009) point out that both groups “recognize the dropout problem and express strong support for reform”, however, they “do not believe that students at risk for dropping out would respond to high expectations and work harder” (p. 21). In addition, Bridgeland et al. (2009) found that “less than one-third of teachers believe that schools should expect all students to meet high academic standards, graduate with the skills to do college-level work, and provide extra support to struggling students” (2009, NP). This places the dropout reform efforts in a dire position. While teachers and principals agree that there is a problem, they do not agree that something can be done about it.

President Barack Obama has made it clear that “dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country” (2010) In 2010 President Obama stated that

We will be able to keep the American promise of equal opportunity if we fail to provide a world-class education to every child. This effort will require the skills and talents of many, but especially our nation’s teachers, principals, and other

school leaders. Our goal must be to have a great teacher in every classroom and a great principal in every school. We know that from the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents – it is the teacher standing at the front of that classroom. To ensure the success of our children, we must do better to recruit, develop, support, retain, and reward outstanding teachers in America’s classrooms (Obama, 2010).

According to Bridgeland et al. (2009), only 14% of principals and 11% of teachers saw the dropout problem as a crisis; believing that the “dropout rate could be halved in a decade” (p. 22).

In the studies a correlation between motivation and school efficacy were strongly linked. It appears that high school drop outs are driven by their fear of failure, lack of engagement and most of all, lack of motivating factors. Interestingly, Fortier et.al (1997) found that parental motivation plays a much bigger role in student drop-out rates than does that of the teachers or administration. Bridgeland, et al. (2009) found that “seventy-four percent of teachers and 69% of principals felt parents bore all or most of the responsibility for children dropping out” (p. 19). On the other hand, Willis (2006) believes that if schools *ignite* student learning and engagement in schools and classrooms, then students will be less likely to drop out. This falls in line with Bridgeland, et al., who states:

School districts should develop options for students, including a curriculum that connects classroom learning with real life experiences, smaller learning communities with individualized instruction, and alternative learning

environments that offer rigorous and specialized programs to students at risk of dropping out. (2009, NP)

In both studies, a correlation between motivation and school efficacy were strongly linked. It appears that high school drop outs are driven by their fear of failure, lack of engagement, and, most of all, their lack of motivating factors. Interestingly, Fortier et.al (1997) found that parental motivation plays a much bigger role in student drop-out rates than does that of the teachers or administration. On the other hand, Willis (2006) believes that if schools *ignite* student learning and engagement in schools and classrooms, then students will be less likely to drop out.

At-Risk

There are many elements that may predispose youth to the risk of being classified as at-risk. Some factors are based solely on academic achievement. According to Watson and Gemin these

Include not meeting the requirements necessary for promotion to the next grade level or to graduate from high school, falling behind other students of their age or grade level in educational attainment, failing two or more courses of study, or not reading at grade level. (2008, NP)

Likewise, Chen & Kaufman (1997) point out that students are considered at-risk if they have one or more of the following characteristics:

- Low Socio-economic status.
- From a single parent family.
- An older sibling dropped out of school.
- The student had changed schools two or more times.

- Had average grades of “C” or lower from sixth to eighth grade.
- Repeated a grade.

In addition, NACOL (2008) suggest that the population of students needing credit recovery overlaps with those considered at-risk, but that the two groups are not the same.

Students need to recover credit because they have failed or dropped out of class.

A student who fails several classes is likely to be at-risk, but a student who fails only one class may not be. Conversely, a student may be identified as at-risk due to a variety of factors despite not having failed a single class. (NACOL, 2008, p. 6)

Soon after Lyndon B. Johnson became president in the 1960s, he launched his War on Poverty.

A significant portion of this legislation was the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This landmark legislation established the goal of equal access and treatment for poor and minority students and supported these students with a variety of compensatory programs such as Title I. (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 4)

At-risk students are more likely than any other student population as a whole to drop out of school. James Coleman (1966) of the University of Chicago conducted the largest educational reform study to date, gathering data from more than 600,000 students, 60,000 teachers, and 6,000 schools. “He concluded that teachers could only impact about 10% of the effects of poverty” (Coleman et al., 1966, NP). In response to the Coleman report, Ronald Edmonds (1982), a professor at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, conducted his own study and denounced the Coleman report as untrue. Edmonds (1982)

introduced the Five Correlates of Effective Schools. He believed that all children could learn, no matter their circumstance, if the school they attended was effective.

Edmonds (1982) was interested in what makes a school a good school. At a time when many educators questioned the validity of testing, Edmonds felt that standardized reading and math tests gave students important information about their performance and gave educators and administrators useful data not only about individual students but also about the quality of the education being offered at the school.

Ronald Edmonds (1982) summarizes that in all effective schools:

- The leadership of the principal was notable for substantial attention to the quality of instruction.
- There is a pervasive and broadly understood instructional focus.
- There is an orderly, safe climate conducive to teaching and learning.
- Teacher behaviors convey the expectation that all students are expected to obtain at least minimum mastery.
- Measures of student achievement is the basis for program evaluation.

Sadly, even though Edmonds disproved Coleman's report, the flawed research led to more than three decades of "destructive school practices that stigmatized the neediest of our children and youth and created a growing underclass of Americans who are undereducated, illiterate, underemployed, or, even worse, unemployable" (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 5).

In 1983, the Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*. The research called for the restructuring of our schools so that academic achievement would be widespread. Few would disagree that in our nation all should be afforded an

equal education, although how to get there is often disputed. Theories varied from ideas about specially funded programs, general resource differences culturally, limits of public schools, and inability to “universalize schools” (Graham, 2005). Much of this shift in the education of public school students had to do with the students themselves; students began to take after school jobs, and were more reluctant to use their extra time for studying. According to Graham (2005), Americans believed that discipline was the biggest problem in schools in 1983. On the contrary, teachers believed that lack of student interest, parental indifference, overcrowded classrooms, and limited financial support were the biggest problems. “The drumbeat of today demands that all children achieve academically at a high level and the measure of that achievement is tests” (Graham, 2005, p.1). The average freshman high school graduation rate for United States is 74.9% (United States Department of Education, 2010). According to Steinberg and Kinchloe (2004), “students in urban areas are two times as likely to leave before graduation, and drop-outs are 30-60% in some U.S. urban schools” (p.55). Only 52% of Hispanic students and 51% of African American students graduate in the United States. According to the *Silent Epidemic* report (Bridgeland et al., 2006), 88% of students who dropped out of school had passing grades. The National Center for Educational Statistics study by Setzer and Lewis (2005) revealed that online learning was effective for growing school districts that lacked adequate structural resources, college level programs such as Advanced Placement, and qualified teachers. In addition, the study also found that online learning helped to reduce scheduling conflicts, assisted to meet the needs of high poverty or rural students, and accommodated non-traditional students who struggled in classroom settings.

There is growing evidence that poor and minority students can learn effectively when research-based practices are used in schools and in the classroom (Barr & Parrett, 2007). When schools replace the failed practices of the “pedagogy of poverty” (drills, worksheets, lectures) with research-based strategies, learning increases significantly, especially for the children of poverty (Barr & Parrett, 2007, p. 9). Research has shown that effective schools share certain essential characteristics. According to Edmonds (1982), “to be effective, a school need not bring all students to identical levels of mastery, but must bring an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social classes to a minimum mastery” (NP). Helping at-risk students to achieve their high school diploma through online learning, as well as accelerated students move forward addresses this essential characteristic.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2009) defined five strategies that districts could use to attack the dropout rate. These include

- Adopt a long-term approach that begins with strengthening school readiness.
- Enhance the holding power of schools, with an intensive focus on ninth grade.
- Focus on the forces outside of school that contribute to dropping out.
- Address the needs of those groups at highest risk of dropping out.
- Build on the skills and understanding of the adults who affect teens’ motivation and ability to stay in school.

Studies of high school dropouts point to several factors that play a key role in students’ decision to leave school including, disengagement from classroom instruction, not being promoted, behavior issues, high rates of absenteeism, and poor or failing grades in core subjects (Azzam 2007; Kennelly & Monrad 2007). While their reasons for leaving

school vary, many dropouts share a common experience: They are met with too little resistance from those in charge of their education.

9th Grade Retention

Zigmond and Thorton (1985) found that ninth grade failure was a strong correlate of high school dropout. Ninth grade appears to be a very ambiguous stretch on the road to graduation. The difficulty of the transition from middle school to high school is well documented, especially in large cities. Recent studies indicate that most ninth graders at nonselective urban high schools enter with academic skills several years below grade level, and that urban students who drop out have often encountered severe academic problems in ninth grade. Dropout prevention efforts should therefore focus intensively on grade nine (Allensworth & Easton, 2005; Neild, Stoner-Eby & Furstenberg, 2008; Steinberg & Almeida, 2008).

Students who had graduated from high school had not repeated ninth grade; a large proportion of those who had dropped out were ninth grade repeaters. It seemed that failure in ninth grade was an important variable that increases students' risk for dropping out of high school (Sansone & Baker 1987, NP).

Commonly, Legters, and Kerr (2001) found that 60% of students who eventually dropped out of high school “failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade”. If poor and minority students are to learn effectively and not be left behind, schools must demonstrate unwavering determination to eliminate programs that have led to high dropout rates (Gehring, 2004).

- In Baltimore, Maryland, where 40% of ninth-grade students drop out of school, the school board has reduced the number of credits needed for promotion to the tenth grade (Gehring, 2004, p.1).
- In Houston, Texas, the school board replaced a policy that required students to pass core courses in each grade before being promoted to the next. Now students have until the end of twelfth grade to pass all core tests.
- Other school districts have used career-theme academies, smaller schools, block-scheduled classes, and alternative schools to improve the graduation rate of poor and minority students (Gehring, 2004).

“Grade retention has increased in recent years, primarily due to an increased emphasis on accountability and standards” (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002, p. 14). In 2002 President George W. Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that was aimed at increasing student performance in academics, thus improving academic standards across the nation (Neild, 2009). While elements of NCLB Act have been favorable, the law heavily impacted test standards (Neild, 2009). Since the origin of the NCLB Act, 2.4 million students, or 15% of the school-aged population, repeat a grade each school year (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006).

By ninth grade, 30-50% of all students will have been retained at least once and will thus be overage for their grade level (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). Jimerson, et. al (2002) found compelling evidence that “grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropout status” (NP). Furthermore, Watson and Gemin (2008) found that over 60% of the students who eventually drop out of high school failed at least 25% of their credits in the ninth grade, compared to 8% of their

peers who had similar difficulty. “Overwhelming evidence shows that being retained in earlier grades dramatically impacts students’ risk of dropping out of high school” (Anderson et al., 2002, NP). Debbie Blue and Jennifer Cook (2004) of The University of Texas at Austin found that “retained students are 2-11 times more likely to drop out during high school than nonretained students”. According to the TEA, “being overage for grade is a better predictor for dropping out than underachievement” (1996, p. 3). Overage students make up approximately 80% of those who drop out. Previous efforts to quantify the relationship between grade retention and school completion indicate that dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Furthermore, students who repeat once have a 35% chance of dropping out, while students who repeat two or more grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100% (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Penna and Talerico (n.d.) completed a study that included surveys from high school dropouts. The underlying issue that continued to come up was grade retention. According to students “not much changed the second (or third) time around. Repeaters usually experienced the same assignments, instruction, textbooks, and tests they had failed the previous year. Often students’ teachers didn’t change” (2009, NP). Participants vividly recalled their initial reactions to being required to repeat a grade. They spanned the emotional spectrum from anger, denial, and disbelief, to shame, upset, humiliation, and frustration with both themselves and their schools. Often the retention decision was viewed as unjust or illogical. As one retained dropout put it, “It made no sense to me that they’d made me repeat a whole year just because I failed two subjects in middle school” (NACOL, 2008, NP). Another

characterized it as “ridiculous’ for his teachers to place him in eighth grade when he was 16 years old.

For the past century, K-12 public education in the United States has been divided into districts composed of kindergartens, elementary, middle, and high schools that have for the most part grown independently of the other. Barr and Parrett (2007) question the transition practices that schools have in place for these students, and “For underachieving children of poverty, these transitions can range from lifesaving to brutal” (p. 215). Barr and Parrett (2007) believe that school should “provide for the developmental, social, and learning needs of our diverse children as they enter and progress through our schools” (p. 215). Blue and Cook (2004) note that research has:

Shown that the transition of ninth grade is vital. In Texas public high schools, slightly more than 31% of the students are enrolled in grade 9, thus suggesting a fairly high retention rate for grade 9 students, a fairly high dropout rate after grade 9, or a combination of both phenomena. (p.119)

Additionally, research has continuously suggested that once a student has fallen behind as early as ninth grade, high school graduation expectations fall as well. “Evidence is growing indicating that students who fall behind academically during the freshman year have very low odds of earning a high school diploma” (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). Bornsheuer et al. noted that “as educators become more concerned with the push for excellence – which possibly means calling for increased requirements, longer school days, and higher standards – the school administration might be driving even more students out of the door” (2011).

Online Learning & Credit Recovery Programs

On-time accrual of credits is a major issue for many high school students (Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien, & Daniel, 2009). For some struggling teens, opportunities to catch up can make the difference between completing school and dropping out. For example, the results of an analysis conducted by the New York City Department of Education showed that 93 percent of the city's dropouts were overage for their grade and behind in the number of credits they had earned toward graduation. After creating multiple pathways specifically designed for overage and under-credited students—including smaller alternative schools and evening “catch-up” programs—the city's graduation rate for these students nearly tripled (American Youth Policy Forum, 2007).

According to research and evaluation studies on effectiveness of online learning, students appear to be equal or better than the traditional classroom. Students show an equivalent or better performance in well-designed online learning courses when compared to with high quality classroom courses (Cavanaugh, 2009). Most full length online courses facilitate the three higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956), of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, whereas shorter, training modules lend themselves to the lower levels of knowledge, comprehension, and application. While many feel an online course may be a point and click adventure, many students perceive online courses as more rigorous than the traditional face-to-face, especially when repeating a traditional course with a teacher that the student has taken the course with previously. Outside of the student themselves taking responsibility for their online learning, online learning advisors, or Grad Coaches, also play a vital role in the success of the online learner.

Online learning programs are designed to expand high-quality educational opportunities and to meet the needs of diverse students. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that while the initial reason for online learning was to offer courses that were not readily available, now the majority of school districts offer online courses to meet the needs of individual students (2008). Districts are looking to offer more “personalized pathways” to learning (NCES, 2008). According to NCES (2008), many educators agree that online learning is an effective way to reach students who fail one or more course, students who are at-risk for dropping out, or students who may need an alternative to traditional education.

“Distance education, which began as correspondence courses in the nineteenth century and grew into educational television during the twentieth century, evolved into learning on the Web by the mid-1990s” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, NP). Online learning is becoming fortified in the educational scene. More and more school districts are trying alternative methods to combat the high rate of high school dropouts. Watson and Gemin (2008) note that “online learning programs are designed to expand high-quality educational opportunities and to meet the needs of diverse students” (NP).

Perry and Pilati point out that “despite the growth of online instruction and the unique needs it addresses, it has not achieved universal acceptance, and there are those who hold distance education to higher standards than traditional instruction” (2011, NP). “The prospect of greater scrutiny, however, may prompt the development of online offerings that exceed traditional quality and effectiveness expectations” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, NP). Yet, this thought must be scrutinized because the same students that we are attempting to get back into the educational environment will be the same ones that we run

off with this concept. The work should be of equal value to what students are expected to accomplish in the classroom. Thus, online instructors:

Should be mindful of the need to know their students through the use of a variety of forms of interaction throughout the duration of the course. Just as face-to-face instructors know their students by sight, online instructors should come to know their students through the quality of their work, their writing, and their online presence. (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p.91)

This is why the role of the Graduation Coach is vital to the success of this program.

Administrators cannot place at-risk students online, alone. The mentoring and facilitation that the Graduation Coach offers plays just as important of a role as the classroom teacher in a traditional environment:

Despite the lack of face-to-face interaction, teachers running online courses are able to see exactly what their students are up to, and whether or not they're putting in the time to get schoolwork done. Teachers can find out how many times a student has logged in to the online course, how long they've stayed logged in for and what they've looked at. (Frank, 2012, p.3)

“As online programs increasingly focus on at-risk students and credit recovery, educators are finding that reaching these students presents a specific set of issues” (Watson & Gemin 2008). The advantage that online learners have over traditional classroom learners is that if “they need additional time to absorb material” they can do so and it “allow[s] students who can move more quickly to do so, within reason” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, NP). Facilitators need to be cognizant of the student learner. Just as all differentiated instruction is not one-size fits all, neither is online learning. Students are

required to be “more self-motivated than traditional students who physically face their instructors and colleagues on a regular basis. “Online students are much more on their own to learn the material” (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007, NP). As a result of students having already satisfied seat time in a course in which they were unsuccessful, they can focus on earning credit based on competency of the content standards. The main focus of any credit recovery program is to help a student stay in school and ultimately graduate on time (gavirtualschool.org).

The Wisconsin Virtual School website points out that “in recent years, an increasing number of online programs have begun focusing on offering credit recovery and serving at-risk students” (NP). Credit recovery programs have taken place in traditional classrooms during school hours, after regular school hours, in the evening and on weekends, in summer school and through student-teacher correspondence. The United States General Accounting Office in 2002 pointed out that while prevention programs can differ from state to state, they all tend to form around three main approaches:

1. Supplemental services for at-risk students.
2. Different forms of alternative education for students who do not do well in regular classrooms.
3. School-widening restructuring efforts for all students.

Online credit recovery serves as both a supplemental service for gaining credit and a form of alternative education. Watson and Gemin (2008) point out that the majority of prevention programs tend to cluster around three main approaches:

1. Supplemental services for at-risk students.

2. Different forms of alternative education for students who do not do well in regular classrooms.
3. School-wide restructuring efforts for all students.

In recent years, an increasing number of online programs have begun focusing on offering credit recovery and serving at-risk students. Goals related to credit recovery and at-risk students vary with each online program. According to Watson and Gemin (2008) they most often include one or more of the following:

- Help students make up credits to meet graduation requirements.
- Meet graduation deadlines.
- Prepare students for state exams.
- Get dropout students back in school.
- Provide educational equity for all students.
- Meet budgetary concerns while trying to serve all students.

Online learning has been a cause for concern in some schools and districts because the challenge of proving it effective is always in question (Finora, 2008). Overcoming these initial concerns was a challenge for many districts. Many of the traditional classroom teachers “expressed concern over the quantity and quality of the online coursework” (Watson & Gemin 2008, NP). Teachers also began to fear that their positions would be overtaken by computer-based instruction. However, Watson and Gemin (2008) found that “teachers have not only accepted online learning as a valid option for credit recovery, but have begun to embrace the use of online content in the classroom in a blended, whole-group setting”. Cindy Lohan shares that “as more data is gathered it confirms what so many of us believe, that online learning gives students

seeking credit recovery the individual attention they need to be successful”, which, as aforementioned, is the purpose of any credit recovery program.

Specifically Apex Learning is the leading provider of digital courseware for secondary education in the nation’s schools. Since 1999, Apex Learning has served over 660,000 students through 2.8 million enrollments and 4,500 school districts, in 50 states and over 70 countries. The Commission of Schools of the Northwest Association of Accredited Schools (NAAS) accredits APEX as a Distance Education School. Apex Learning offers three levels of courses; standard, AP, and literacy advantage. Apex also provides audio and text materials that can be skipped or utilized by a student (Davis, 2010). Apex offers communication between instructor and student via Wiki, email, instant messaging, or by telephone (www.apexlearning.com, 2010).

Integrity & Self Efficacy of the Online Student Learner

Cheating has long been an issue in the traditional classroom and is no different for online learning. However, in an online learning environment there can be a greater chance of unauthorized collaboration, use of unapproved sources, or even the chance someone other than the student is taking a test or completing an assignment (Eplion & Keefe, 2007). The use of randomized tests and quizzes, and open book exams help with the concerns about online cheating (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). One of the main cheating issues for an online course is whether or not the person taking the exams is the student that is enrolled in the course. While having someone take an online assessment for someone else is likely, completing an entire online course for someone else is highly unlikely. Especially since most online providers and school districts expect students to report to a supervised location for exams. Directing students to submit assignments

periodically throughout the duration of the course can help eliminate cheating.

Requesting assignments throughout will also keep students on track to completing the course in a timely manner. A facilitator, or Graduation Coach, will also be able to keep students on track as well as be familiar with the student's work and able to identify sudden changes that may indicate plagiarism. Eplion and Keefe (2007) suggests that multiple assignments can make it more difficult for students to recruit others to assist them, and requiring a face-to-face, cumulative final that will hold a significant weight on the final grade can also thwart cheating.

Courseware packages now log IP addresses that are traceable to locations at which an exam was taken, along with the start and end time of the exam. Eplion and Keefe (2007) specify a narrow window in which exams are available to take, limit time per question, scramble questions for each student, and exam questions are randomly selected from a large database of questions. Having practical application questions also gives an added feature to test security that requires students to know more than just the basic knowledge for an exam.

Unfortunately, some believe that cheating is something that is now socially acceptable and that a student drop out self-efficacy would not allow them to believe that they can achieve course completion without the help of others' work. There is also now a concern about what is considered cheating. Since the word "cheating" has such strong connotations and can be difficult to prove, Eplion and Keefe (2007) use the phrase, "the exam protocol has been violated, and the exam results will not be accepted" (NP) Cheating will more likely than not remain a factor in any educational setting, be it traditional or online.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter describes the research methodology and procedures that were used to collect and analyze the data for this study, as well as to address the research questions.

The methodology is divided into the following subsections: (a) research design, (b) participants and data sources, (c) procedures and instrumentation, (d) data analyses, (e) limitations, and (f) summary.

The purpose of this study was to determine the current state of online credit recovery and the affect it has on the high school graduation rate of at-risk, inner city students. This study investigates what data exists regarding those at –risk for dropping out of high school and online credit recovery in Texas. Credit recovery data from a large urban school district in Southeast Texas was obtained and high school graduation rates and drop out data was obtained from the Texas Education Agency. The following research questions will be addressed in this study:

Research Questions

1. Does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school drop-out rate of inner-city, at-risk youth?
2. Since inception, has the online credit recovery initiative accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements?

Description of the research design

A non-experimental, descriptive analysis based on quantitative, archival data is the method used for this study. According to social research methods, descriptive statistics were used to describe the basic features of the data in a study. They provide simple summaries about the sample and the measures. Descriptive statistics form the

basis of virtually every quantitative analysis of data. It provides a “powerful summary that may enable comparisons across people or other units” (Social Research Methods, 2013, NP). This is the most appropriate design for this study because it utilizes archival data for at-risk students taking online courses for credit recovery.

Setting

Texas. Texas has over 4.8 million students and more than 1,200 school districts and charter schools, taught by 333,000 teachers (Texas Public School Statistics, 2009-2010). The majority of Texas’ students are Hispanic (49%) and White (33%) and over half are economically disadvantaged. In 2010, Texas developed the Dropout Recovery Pilot Program (DRPP), although currently the state has no agency that tracks online credit recovery data for dropouts. The DRPP identifies and recruits students who have dropped out of Texas public schools, with the mission of providing them with services that will enable them to earn a high school diploma (Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program, 2010). This program seeks to provide flexibility to meet student needs, experimenting with cutting edge strategies, such as online learning, student facilitated learning, co-op opportunities, to ensure academic environments that are challenging and differentiated for each student. According to a comparison study by the Texas Education Agency, Texas has the 10th highest overall graduation among 34 states that are reporting to the National Governors Association (NGA) Compact Graduation Rate for the Class of 2010. The NGA Compact is a four-year, on-time graduation rate that emphasizes using actual student data over estimates.

Southeast Texas School District. The district in southeast Texas educates a diverse population of students with 279 schools and more than 203,000 students, making

it the largest district in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States. The cohort class of 2009 had a graduation rate of 70.0% (AEIS, 2010) and, in 2011 the cohort had a graduation rate of 78.5% (HISD, 2012). This is a 30% increase from the 2007 school year. According to AEIS data, Houston ISD has a 61.9% Hispanic population, 26.2% African American population, 7.8% White population, and 3.1% Asian population (AEIS, 2012). More than 80% of the student population is economically disadvantaged and 64% are at-risk. Currently in this district, the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative is a district-wide initiative that began in January 2010. This initiative placed computer labs with special APEX learning software at 46 high school campuses as well as graduation coaches at 27 of these campuses.

Subjects

The first semester of the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative focused on senior high school students who required credit recovery courses in order to meet graduation requirements. All schools are associated with the identified large urban school district in Texas that consists of 301 square miles within the greater city limits. Further, the identified large urban school district is the seventh-largest public school system in the nation and the largest in Texas. The district maintains a total of 298 campuses. According to the district fact sheet, the total enrollment is 203,066 students. 80.6 % of the student population is economically disadvantaged, 64.0 % are considered at-risk and the district had a 78.5 % graduation rate in the 2011 school year. The data illustrated in Table 3-1 indicates the number of high school students by ethnicity.

Table 3-1 Students by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	# of Students	% of All Students
Am Indian/Alaskan	474	0.2%
African American	51,015	25.1%
Asian	6,668	3.3%
Hispanic	126,711	62.4%
Native Haw./Other	224	0.1%
Two or More	1,526	0.8%
White	16,448	8.1%
Total	203,066	100%

The demographics of the district are represented by Hispanic (62%), Caucasian (8.1%), African American (25.1%), Asian (3.3%), and Native American (0.2%). Of the student population, 80.4% qualify as Economically Disadvantaged and 29.9% are considered limited English proficient. During the 2010-2011 school year this district was ranked an Acceptable district by the TEA as documented on the Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report.

Procedures

Online credit recovery completion rate data was requested from the district through a formal application request. The district was asked to provide completion rates, as well as any other supporting data that has been collected about the online course student experience in spreadsheet format if possible. This study compiled archival data of both the completion rates and the drop-out rates of students attempting credit recovery through online learning. Approval by the University of Houston Committee for the

Protection of Human Subjects was obtained before beginning the study. A research application was sent to the district to request completion data generated by students who have participated in online credit recovery courses anytime between the 2010 and 2012 school year. High school graduation rate data was also obtained through the AEIS data from the Texas Education Agency. Informed consent from the students was unnecessary, as data utilized was archival and every measure was taken to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed for drop out and graduation rates of students that have completed online credit recovery courses through Grad Lab anytime between the 2010 and 2012 school years. A comparative analysis of archival data was conducted and based on drop out and graduation rates of students who have completed online credit recovery courses in Grad Lab. The student numbers for graduation rates and dropout rates were looked at for each year and compared to determine if the numbers had risen or fallen after the incorporation of the online credit recovery initiative. Below is a summary table of research questions, data sources, collection procedures, and data analysis.

Limitations

The inception of the online learning for credit recovery initiative for public high school students is very new. As a result, the research for some programs is very limited. There are very few studies that have researched online credit recovery and if it positively affects the high school graduation rate. The ISD that has implemented the new program does run data at the end of every school year, but this data has yet to be interpreted. This study will provide feedback for at-risk students in a large urban district. However,

generalizations may not be fully comparable to every district in Texas. The results will be applicable to inner-city, at-risk youth in urban districts.

Chapter 4

Restatement of the Problem

Dropout and graduation rates are crucial issues for all school districts in the United States. According to Glass and Rose (2008), students who drop out of school are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, live in poverty, receive public assistance, become imprisoned and live unhealthy lifestyles. While several programs, from after-school programs, summer school programs and outside vendors such as 21st Century and Communities in Schools have all tried to keep students from dropping out, no one method seems to stick. Now school districts are trying to discover innovative ways to retain students. “Innovative programs in high schools focus on non-traditional methods, such as virtual schooling, for retaining at-risk students and attracting those who dropped out of school” (HISD p. 3).

The purpose of this study was to determine if the implementation of online learning opportunities via Grad Lab, available to at-risk students, has fared better than the traditional credit recovery methods. This study investigated what data exists regarding potential high school dropouts utilizing credit recovery through online learning to complete their high school diploma in the 2009-2010 school year and the 2010-2011 school year, compared to those at-risk students who completed traditional credit recovery methods. This study revealed the various ethnicities of students taking online and traditional credit recovery courses, the success or failure rates based on gender, the grade levels at which they took the courses, and finally if the student graduated upon completion of online or traditional credit recovery methods. This study attempts to examine the following:

1. Does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school drop-out rate of inner-city, at-risk youth?
2. Since inception, has the online credit recovery initiative accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements?

This chapter presents the results of tests run on each data set obtained, divided into sections by each research question investigated.

This study is a descriptive analysis of data obtained from the district. The data was broken into four distinct sets. The original, raw data were converted in order to run a comparative data analysis. Online and traditional credit recovery data were obtained in spreadsheet files from the district. Each set of numbers were analyzed to determine if the graduation rate had fallen or risen as well as if the dropout rate had fallen or risen after the incorporation of the online credit recovery initiative.

Data Analysis

This study included data from 45 high school campuses in a large urban school district in Texas. Students who took either credit recovery via the traditional method as defined earlier, or credit recovery via online during the 2009-2010 school year and the 2010-2011 school year were included in the study. After a careful analysis of the data, there were 15,134 students that took traditional credit recovery methods and a total of 1,374 students that took online credit recovery courses during the 2009-2010 school year. There were 11,186 students identified as traditional credit recovery takers for the 2010-2011 school year and 13,905 students identified as online credit recovery takers during this school year. From 2009-2010 to 2010-2011, the number of online courses offered increased from 8,048 to 13,024. During the 2010-2011 school year, 51.3 % of students

participating in the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative (Grad Lab) were 12th graders, which was an increase of 19.6 percentage points over 2009-2010. In 2010-2011, the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative continued to have higher percentage of 12th graders enrolled in courses than any other online course provider.

Table 4-1 High School Students That Participated in Credit Recovery during the 2009-10 and 2010-11 School Years

45 High School Campuses	2009-2010	2010-2011
Traditional	15,134	11,186
Online	1,374	13,905

This study served as a retrospective cohort study and utilized a variety of statistical methods for data analysis and to examine relationships between its dependent variable (i.e., graduation), independent variables (i.e., gender, ethnicity, and grade level). The data analysis is presented in five parts. First, a general summary is presented of the students in both traditional credit recovery and online credit recovery. Secondly, the data from 2009-2010 was analyzed. Thirdly, the data from 2010-2011 was analyzed. Fourth, the data from 2009-2010 school year and 2010-2011 school year were compared.

Summary of students in the study. In 2009-2010 there were 9,113 graduates in the district. Of the total graduates in 2009-2010, 5.2 % (N= 472) were enrolled in courses offered by the APEX Credit Recovery Initiative (Grad Lab). In 2010-2011, of the 9,955 graduates, those enrolled in Grad Lab increased by 14.7 percentage points, comprising 19.9 % of the total graduates (N=1,978).

The first semester (January 2010) of the online credit recovery initiative targeted twelfth graders needing additional credits to meet graduation requirements. As a result, table 4-2 shows 34.4 % of those participating in the online credit recovery initiative were seniors. Eleventh graders represented the second largest student group at 26.8 %. Tenth grade students represented 20.3 % of the students taking online courses and 9th graders made up 18.6 %. A total of 1,374 students took online credit recovery courses identified in Chancery. During this same school year, 15,134 students completed the traditional method of credit recovery.

Table 4-2 Students Who Participated in Online Credit Recovery

2009-2010	2010-2011
34.4% - 12 th Grade	37.0% - 12 th Grade
26.8% - 11 th Grade	27.0% - 11 th Grade
20.3% - 10 th Grade	18.3% - 10 th Grade
18.6% - 9 th Grade	17.5% - 9 th Grade

During the 2010-2011 school year, 37% of students participating in the online credit recovery initiative were 12th graders. Eleventh graders were again second at 27%, tenth graders at 18.3%, and ninth graders taking online credit recovery for the 2010-2011 school year were 17.5%. A total of 13,024 students took online credit recovery courses identified in Chancery.

Further, Table 4-3 shows the traditional credit recovery method, which decreased for the 2010-2011 school year, had a total population of 11,186 students. Twelfth graders made up only 10%, eleventh graders 31%, tenth graders 27 %, and finally 32% of ninth graders made up the amount of students that took traditional credit recovery courses.

Table 4-3 Grade Level of Students Who Participated in Traditional Credit Recovery

2009-2010	2010-2011
7.6% - 12 th Grade	10% - 12 th Grade
26.1% - 11 th Grade	31% - 11 th Grade
24.5% - 10 th Grade	27% - 10 th Grade
41.7% - 9 th Grade	32% - 9 th Grade

Further disaggregation of the data found that in the 2010-2011 school year, males outnumbered females for Hispanics, with 59 percent of females and 61.5 percent of males completing traditional credit recovery. African American females outnumbered males in taking traditional credit recovery. Thirty-seven percent of females completed traditional credit recovery and only 33.3 percent of African American males completed. However, the numbers were far closer in those recovering credits via the online credit recovery initiative. For African Americans, 29.5 percent of females completed online credit recovery and 27.9 percent of males completed the online method of recovering credits. Hispanic males and females were basically tied in recovering credits online, with 60.6 percent of females and 61 percent of males completing online credit recovery. The table

below illustrates the number of males and females that attempted traditional credit recovery versus those that attempted credit recovery through the online initiative.

Table 4-4 Gender Breakdown of Students Who Attempted Online and Traditional Credit Recovery

Ethnicity	Traditional	Traditional	Online	Online
	Female	Male	Female	Male
Am. Indian	.21%	.29%	.24%	.28%
Asian	.73%	.88%	3.4%	3.1%
Af. American	37%	33.3%	29.5%	27.9%
Hispanic	59%	61.5%	60.6%	61%
Native Hawaiian	.02%	.14%	.18%	.24%
Other 2 or more	.35%	.33%	.66%	.31%
White	2.6%	3.6%	5.4%	7.2%

The majority of the students that took both traditional credit recovery and online credit recovery were Hispanic (about 60% across the board), with African Americans coming in second (upwards of 30%) and Whites far behind both, but made up the next largest population of ethnicities attempting to recover credits either the traditional or online method.

Further exploration details the breakdown of gender in each grade level. Females at all grade levels made up less of the population than males both in traditional credit recovery as well as in online credit recovery attempts. Table 4-5 illustrates this dynamic.

Table 4-5 Grade Level and Gender Breakdown of Online Credit Recovery and Traditional Credit

Grade	Females	Males	Females	Males
Level	Online	Online	Traditional	Traditional
9 th	18%	17%	32%	33.6%
10 th	20%	16%	25%	28.1%
11 th	28%	26%	34%	29.6%
12 th	34%	40%	9%	8.6%

Research Question # 1

For research question number one, does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school dropout rate of inner-city, at-risk youth, graduation rates were looked at for frequencies and valid percentages of both the graduation rate and the dropout rate. According to the completion data of the district, in Table 4-6 the completion rate has increased since the inception of online credit recovery.

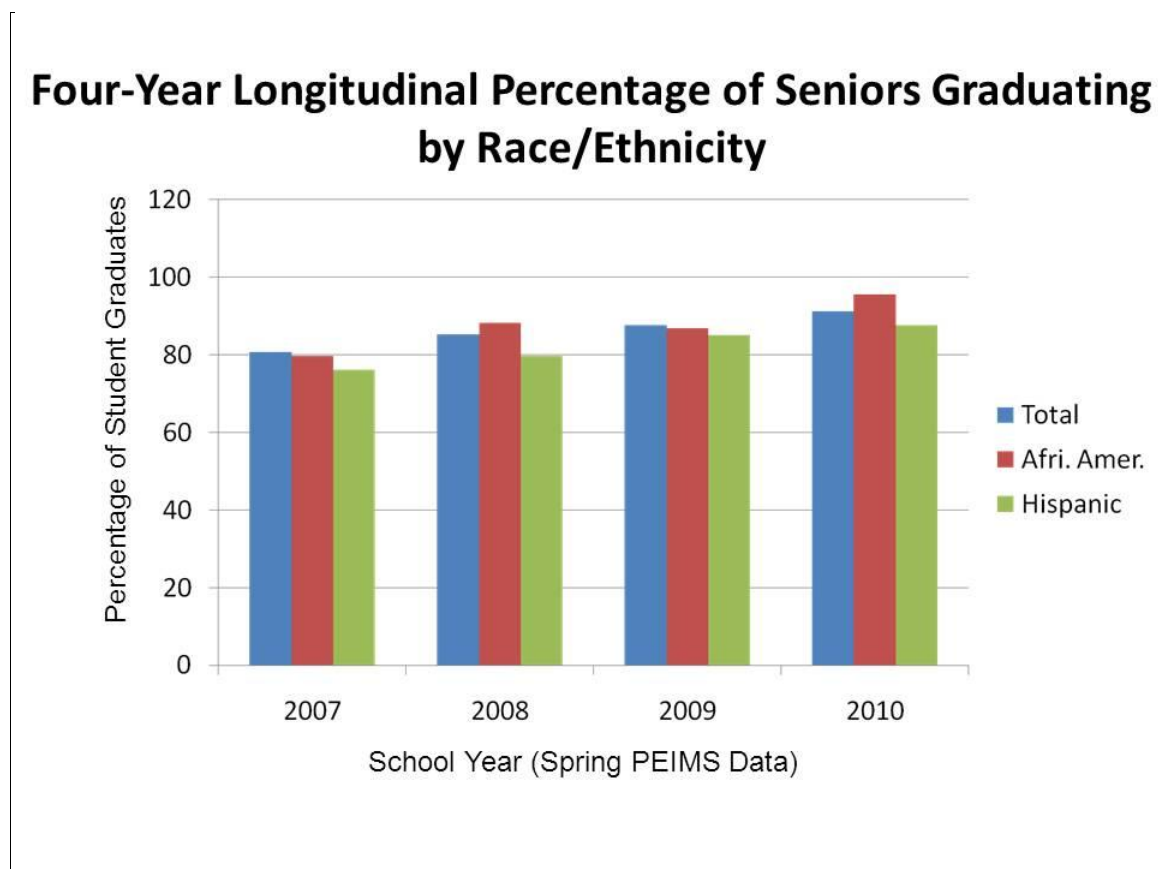
Table 4-6 Two-Year Comparison Status by Student Demographics

	Class of 2009		Class of 2010	
	<u>Grad</u>	<u>Drop</u>	<u>Grad</u>	<u>Drop</u>
All Students	70.0	15.8	74.3	12.6
African Am.	68.4	17.8	73.7	14.4
Asian/Pac. Is.	87.9	7.2	90.5	3.2
Hispanic	65.9	17.4	70.7	13.8
White	87.4	6.0	87.9	5.2
Eco. Disadv.	74.6	13.6	76.0	10.9

Table 4-6 presents a completion rate that has increased from 70.0% to 74.3%, and a dropout rate that has been lowered from 15.8% to 12.6%. In addition, both the higher rate of graduates and the lower number of dropouts stayed evident in economically disadvantaged students in the district.

Further, if previous year's data is looked at for longitudinal growth in the graduation rate of students, a significant change is present (See Figure 4-1)

Figure 4-1 Four-Year Longitudinal Percentage of Seniors Graduating by Race/Ethnicity



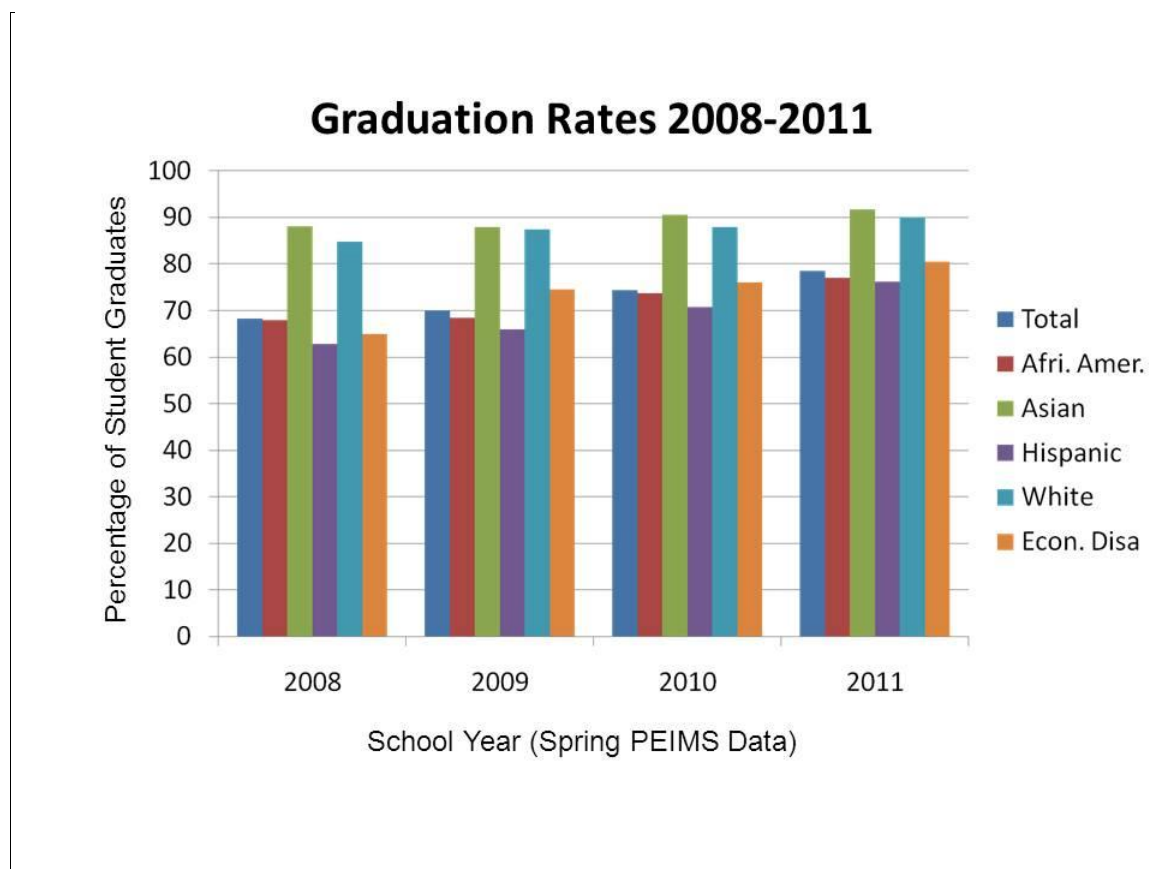
Research Question #2

For research question number two, since inception, has the online credit recovery accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements, annual rates were reported and at the district and state levels and analyzed on the basis of ethnicity and economically disadvantaged status. The 2011 four-year longitudinal cohort includes students who attended ninth grade for the first time in the 2007-08 school year.

Completion rates were determined using graduates and students who continued in school (continuers). Figure 4-2 demonstrates that the study found that the four-year longitudinal

graduation rate for the class of 2011 was 78.5 % which exceeds the previous year's rate by 4.2 percentage points. Increases were evident for all student groups.

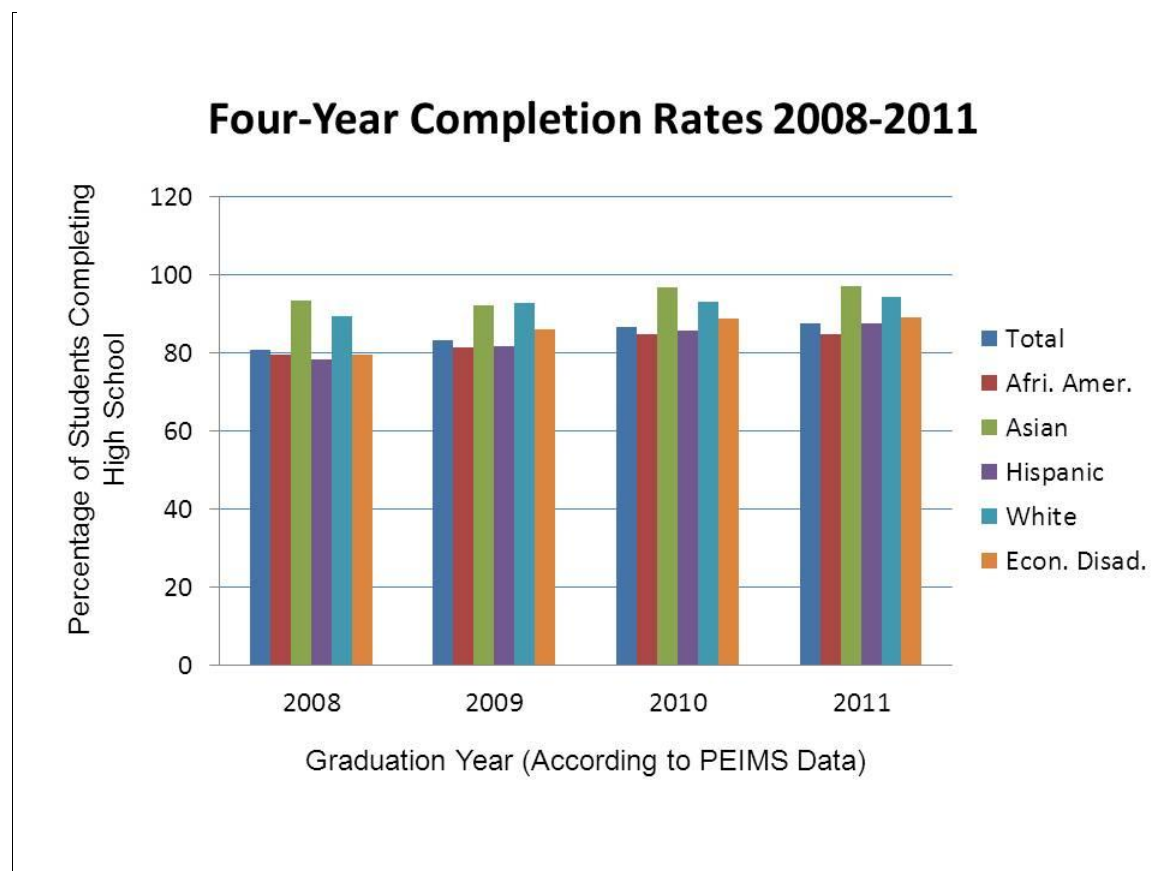
Figure 4-2 Graduation Rates, 2008-2011



The four-year completion rate which includes students who graduated or remained in school for a fifth year was at an all-time high of 87.6%.

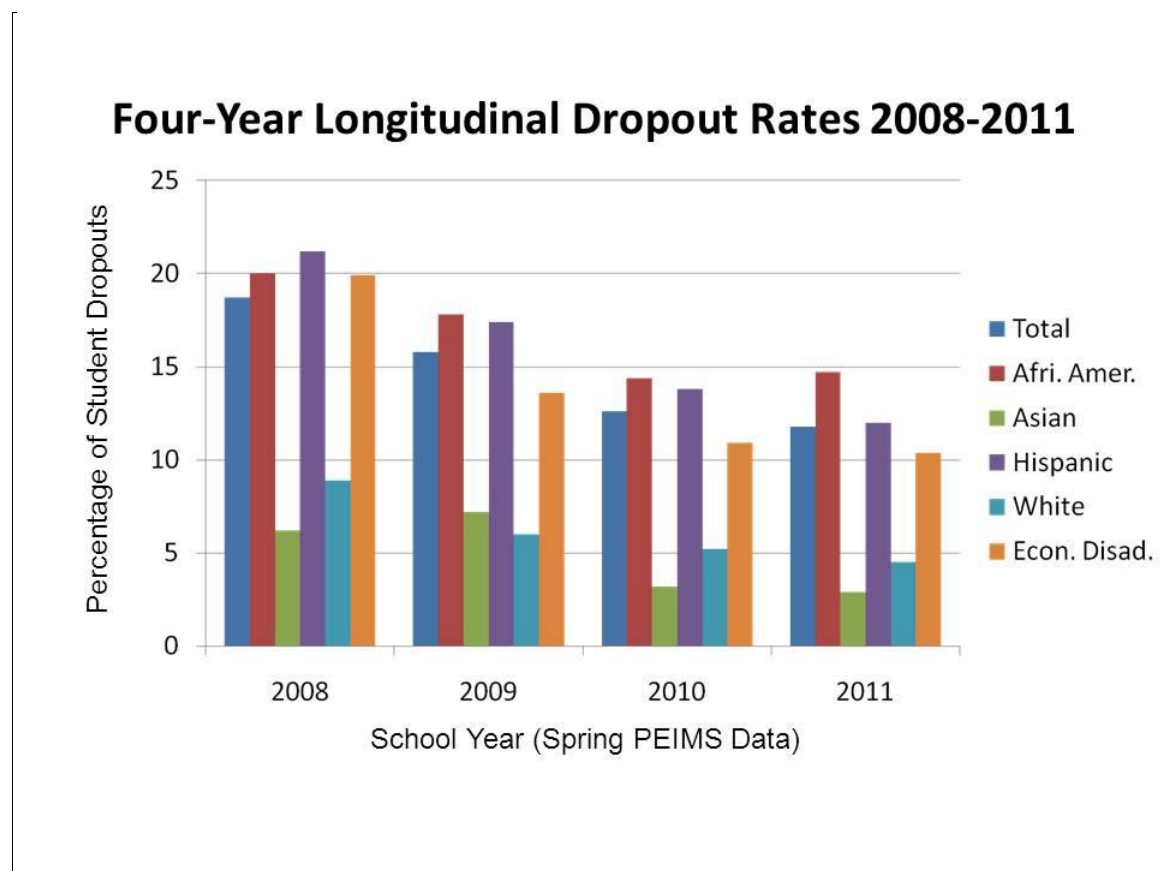
Figure 4-3 shows that all student groups showed increases from the previous year.

Figure 4-3 Four-Year Completion Rates, 2008-2011



In addition, the four-year dropout rate declined from 12.6% to 11.8% for the Class of 2011. Figure 4-4 shows that all student groups except for African American students experienced decreases in the dropout rate.

Figure 4-4 Four-Year Longitudinal Dropout Rates, 2008-2011



Summary

This study revealed the frequency of at-risk students taking online courses for credit recovery and if an increase in the graduation rate followed because of the inception of the Grad Lab. With the results above, this study hopes to reveal whether online learning is as effective as traditional credit recovery for at-risk students. The next chapter, Chapter 5, discusses the overview of the study, discussion of the results, and implications of the study to school administrators and to future research.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

This chapter includes a summary of the results from this study as outlined in Chapter 4. In addition, this chapter includes interpretative comments and discussion of the implications of the conclusions of this study to school administrators and to future research.

In particular, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. Does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school drop-out rate of inner-city, at-risk youth?
2. Since inception, has the online credit recovery initiative accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements?

This study was designed to determine the current state of credit recovery opportunities via online learning available to at-risk students, in order for them to complete their high school diploma with the cohort the student entered high school with. In addition, this study aimed to determine if the implementation of Grad Labs in an urban school district has accelerated the 9th grade cohort. As stated by Aurora (2009), education is changing so that students can be more actively engaged, and suited to many different types of learning styles in order to increase successful learning. Data from the school district was evaluated for completion rates of online courses taken by students attempting online credit recovery via the Graduation Lab. By taking credit recovery online, students who were unsuccessful at traditional credit recovery courses would in turn, be that much more likely to complete a high school diploma and not drop out of high school. The culmination of all data created a bigger picture of the online credit recovery world.

Findings for Research Question #1

For the first research question, does a relationship exist between the online credit recovery initiative (Grad Lab) and the high school dropout rate of inner-city, at-risk youth, completion data and dropout data were analyzed for the district. There can be several reasons for the higher completion rate and lower drop-out rate of students completing online credit recovery courses. First, the district did not record students who dropped online credit recovery courses as W (withdrawal), which could have swayed the completion rate percentages. For credit recovery students who previously failed a course, it is highly unlikely that these same students had such a high rate of success in the course now, but not hopeless. However, students should have in fact had an increase in success, due to the fact that they have already experienced the course material and completed ample seat time for the subject material. The online course was simply a second chance to complete the class. It is not always that a student is unsuccessful because of a misunderstanding of course material, but there could be several reasons for the failure that thus led to the student giving up on school. When the concept of Grad Lab was introduced in 2010, students were presented with a second chance at school; therefore, they were more inclined to complete the online courses for credit. Students could have also been more successful at the online credit recovery courses versus the traditional credit recovery courses because of the Grad Coaches that worked as mentors to the at-risk students. Berge (2001) describes “co-explorer and co-discoverer” in relation to students and teachers of online learning, making this type of learning a more successful approach for some students in comparison to the traditional credit recovery method. Students may have also found the material easier when presented in an online format. In the courses

online, students are able to work through the course at their own pace as well as access the course at any time using an internet connection. With the traditional model, students are really at the mercy of their teachers, only proceeding at the pace of the teacher and meeting once or twice face-to face a week. In addition, students understood that for the majority of them, this was a last chance effort to gain the credits they needed in order to graduate on time. Ronald Edmonds (1982) stated that in order for a school to be effective, students do not all have to perform to a particular level, although an equivalent number of the high and low groups must be brought to “minimum mastery”. Yoh (2011) considers that “moderate success” at completing online courses for credit, is in fact a success. Even though students may have started at differing levels of knowledge, one may have failed with a 67%, one with a 23%, and thus completed the course at a different level of knowledge, each student that completed gained credits that ultimately were used for graduation purposes. Specifically, seniors who completed the traditional credit recovery method had a 45% graduation rate, while those that completed online credit recovery courses had a graduation rate of 79%. With this knowledge, the researcher believes online courses are more effective than traditional credit recovery methods for at-risk, inner-city youth to complete in order to gain a high school diploma and not drop out of high school.

Findings for Research Question # 2

For the second research question, since inception, has the online credit recovery accelerated 9th grade repeaters ability to meet cohort credit requirements, frequencies of grade levels were analyzed, and completion data were calculated. Ninth grade courses for online credit recovery were not offered as much in the first year of inception because the

focus was on graduating seniors. However, the ninth grade students that completed courses did show a slight growth in excelling to their respective cohorts. In the second year of the online credit recovery initiative or Grad Lab, more 9th grade students completed online courses for credit recovery, thus more ninth grade students were reclassified to their appropriate cohort. With the inception of the online credit recovery initiative, building principals were hesitant to add Grad Lab to freshman schedules because they felt that these students were not mature or self-motivated enough to take on such an independent form of learning. On top of those reasons, many felt that freshman had ample enough time to complete Grad Lab courses within their next three years of high school. However, research shows that this is not the correct route to take when dealing with freshmen in high school. This time is a pivotal decision point in the students' lives and if they are close to thinking about dropping out, multiple failed courses can tip the scale in the wrong direction.

While the highest completion rates were at the senior levels, given that seniors have the urgency to graduate, the lowest completion rates were freshman. But this result can be two-fold. First, freshmen had the lowest number of students enrolled, and secondly, freshmen did not have the urgency to complete courses because they had more time to pick up credits throughout high school. However, with that said, it is important to note that freshmen online credit recovery students did show an improved rate of gaining credits and joining their respective cohorts.

Summary of Findings

Both research question findings had positive results. However, it is important to take note of several conditions that could have also led to the gradual increase of the graduation rate for the district.

- The superintendent of the studied district was new to the district the same year as the implementation of the Grad Lab. The Grad Lab and taking on the dropout rate was his big initiative. Therefore, the climates of the schools changed, the expectations, as well as several school leaders. These changes could have positively impacted the graduation rate and lowered the dropout rate for the district, in addition to the creation of Grad Labs.
- With Barack Obama's Race to the Top initiative, there was a strong push to put an effective teacher in the front of every classroom. The district studied implemented this as well. Placing effective teachers in high school classrooms could have also led to the decrease of students dropping out and more youth staying in school.
- Factors that have plagued dropouts for decades, such as low parental involvement, negative school climate and low or no engagement in school, could have taken a positive turn during the school years studied and affected the graduation rate for the better.

Key findings of this study.

- At-risk youth, especially those that are at-risk because of failed classes must be motivated in order to want to stay in school. Graduation alone is not enough. The flexible and self-paced nature of the Grad Lab can

motivate. Graduation Coaches also serve as motivators and mentors to the students at-risk for dropping out. NACOL (2008) notes that online credit recovery is a different model than traditional teaching. The Grad Coach is not only working with the academic aspect of the student, but with the student as a whole. Online courses may be more engaging to students than the traditional model. Online credit recovery can address the mobility of at-risk students. Transferring courses and grades online via Grad Coaches may prove easier than the traditional way.

- Students recovering credits are good candidates for online learning because it allows for individualized instruction. Online learning needs to be rigorous in order to ensure the quality, quantity and integrity of the course. APEX allows for diagnostic testing, which with credit recovery, enables the Grad Coach to move the student along if they show mastery in a certain part, thus allowing the student to only focus on material they need, keeping them engaged.
- The self-paced aspect of online learning is particularly valuable to at-risk youth, who may associate school with stress and difficulty.
- The blended approach that the studied district has implemented is optimal. The Grad Lab provides significant support to the student at-risk for dropping out. The online portion provides differentiated instruction to the 21st century learner, while the Grad Coach provides the support and knowledge that youth need.

- The implementation of the Grad Lab may eventually pay for itself. The model could defray the costs the state uses to capture drop-outs. Online programs are able to expand more easily than traditional programs based on the brick and mortar classrooms.

Implications for School Leadership

The high school drop-out rate in the United States has grown to epidemic proportions. The report *Ending the Silent Epidemic: A Blueprint To Address America's High School Dropout Crisis*, sponsored by the Gates Foundation and several other organizations, describes the challenges that face U.S schools and society as a whole because of students becoming disengaged and dropping out of high school:

- Every 29 seconds another student gives up on school, resulting in more than one million American high school students who drop out every year.
- Nearly one-third of all public high school students – and nearly one half of all African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans – fail to graduate from public high school with their class.
- Dropouts are more likely than high school graduates to be unemployed, in poor health, living in poverty, on public assistance, or single parents with children who drop out of high school with their class.
- Dropouts are more than twice as likely as high school graduates to slip into poverty in a single year and three times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed.
- Dropouts are more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as high school graduates.

- Dropouts are four times less likely to volunteer than college graduates, twice less likely to vote or participate in community projects, and represent only 3 % of actively engaged citizens in the U.S today. (NP)

Each year, almost one third of all public high school students – which includes nearly half of all blacks and Hispanics – fail to graduate from public high schools with their class. Many of these students abandon school with less than two years left to complete their education. Principals must be able to understand the significance of the high school dropout, not only on their AYP rank, but also for the morale of their campus and community. While the push back and cost of recapturing at-risk drop-outs may seem endless, the ramifications for not graduating these students are much greater. Principals and Superintendents alike must be able to answer the call of their students. If a traditional environment is not meeting the need of the 21st century student, then change must be made. It is up to the campus and district leaders that this change is aimed at keeping at-risk students involved in their learning and committed to earning a high school diploma. Leaders should aim to research the online method as a way to differentiate the instruction to meet the needs of the at-risk learner. As stated earlier, in addition to being used as a credit recovery method, NACOL (2008) suggests online learning can include:

- Students making up credits to meet graduation requirements.
- Meeting graduation deadlines.
- Getting drop-outs back in school.
- Preparing students for the state exams.
- Providing educational equity for all student learners.
- Meeting budgetary concerns while trying to serve all students.

Graduation rate trends matter because dropouts without a high school diploma face an increasingly tough job market. But while the progressing high school graduation rates of the studied district show promise, they are not enough to push students to the finish line at the end of college. This means that changes in the rigor of high school curriculum and the significance of a high school diploma need to be changed. The Graduation Labs may be the solution.

Bob Balfanz, a Johns Hopkins University professor, coined the term “drop-out factories” and insists that most schools “become that way because they have a high concentration of needy students but aren’t designed to serve them well” (Powell Report, n.d., NP). He goes on to say that “you have the highest need-kids with a constantly shifting set of adults that don’t have enough person power to make it work...so students fail the ninth grade and are told to repeat the same thing and often drop out instead” (Powell Report, NP). The promise of using online learning to prevent high school students from dropping out is evident. Catching them before it is too late is nothing short of mandatory. This study has shown that online credit recovery is an effective method to keep at-risk, inner-city youth in school and on a four-year path to graduation.

Recommendations for Future Research

The graduation rate data and dropout data of the studied district revealed valuable information about the online learning experience of students as a credit recovery method compared to the traditional approach to credit recovery. The following recommendations would be advised for further research.

More research should be completed and gathered from additional school districts in Texas, and across the United States for effective practices.

With the implementation of the new testing system that began in spring 2012, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), further studies on credit recovery student performance on the test could prove relevant. The STAAR program at grades 3–8 assess the same subjects and grades that are currently assessed on TAKS. At high school, however, grade-specific assessments were replaced with 12 end-of-course (EOC) assessments: Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, English I, English II, English III, World Geography, World History, and U.S. History. Research describing if students who worked online in Grad Labs fared better than those using a more traditional approach to learner could change the face of education even more for 21st century learners.

Because each student groups' graduation rate significantly changed, except African Americans, a more detailed study of what is plaguing these students from graduating could help to determine best practices for the future. Following a high school that has had a successful start with the Grad Lab for a year could help create professional development for existing campuses and future sites.

A more in-depth cost analysis for the sustainability of Graduation Labs on every campus could determine if the fees, technology and staffing necessary for the labs are worthwhile. Further implications could open the door for not only Grad Coaches in the labs, but also possibly outsourcing tutors to help struggling students in particular courses while the Grad Coach continues the role as facilitator and mentor. A case study of an exceptional Grad Coach could open the door for professional development opportunities, best hiring practices for the position, as well as mentoring opportunities between Grad Coaches. In addition, delving into the relationship that a Grad Coach has with their

students is vital. It is the relationship between the two that undoubtedly fosters the students' want and desire to stay in school and graduate.

Conclusion

The impact of the online credit recovery initiative, Grad Lab, has been felt across the district. Teachers have not only accepted online learning as a valid option for credit recovery, but have begun to embrace the use of online content in the classroom in a blended, whole-group setting (NACOL, 2008). Overcoming initial concerns about going to an online credit recovery format was an early challenge for many schools in the district. Many traditional classroom teachers created push-back about the quality and quantity of online work as well as how sitting in front of a computer could be more challenging than completing credit recovery face-to-face with a teacher. There was concern that a move to computer-based instruction would adversely impact all teachers in the district. Contrarily, research has shown that as more data is gathered, the online credit recovery initiative gives students the individual attention they need to be successful (NACOL, 2008). Educators have come to realize that “we can’t meet all of the discipline-specific needs of students with one approach” (Hollosoy, p. 10).

Many students used online learning as a second chance to finally gain credit, liking the pacing and different environment of the Grad Lab when compared to that of a traditional classroom. Online learning and Grad Labs can be an effective educational tool used to lower the drop-out rate in Texas. Students have a higher rate of graduating using online credit recovery versus the traditional model. It is important to note that the online course should be a well-designed model. According to Cavanaugh (2001), research suggests online courses that involve some face-to-face methods will have greater

retention and outcomes than purely online courses. Thus, the model that the studied district has implemented is ideal. Overall, online learning has an enormous potential to improve the equity of learning for all student populations, all while lowering the achievement gaps and drop-out rates of inner-city, at-risk youth.

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Appendix A
APPROVAL FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON HUMAN SUBJECT
RESEARCH COMMITTEE

UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

DIVISION OF RESEARCH

October 15, 2012

April Williams
c/o Dr. Angus MacNeill
Educational Leadership & Cultural Studies

Dear April Williams,

Based upon your request for exempt status, an administrative review of your research proposal entitled "A Study of the Effectiveness of an Online Credit Recovery Initiative in Preventing High School Dropouts." was conducted on September 19, 2012.

In accordance with institutional guidelines, your project is exempt under **Category 4**.

As long as you continue using procedures described in this project, you do not have to reapply for review.* Any modification of this approved protocol will require review and approval by the Committee.

If you have any questions, please contact Alicia Vargas at (713) 743-9215.

Sincerely yours,



Kirstin Rochford, MPH, CIP, CPIA
Director, Research Compliance

*Approvals for exempt protocols will be valid for 5 years beyond the approval date. Approval for this project will expire **September 1, 2017**. If the project is completed prior to this date, a final report should be filed to close the protocol. If the project will continue after this date, you will need to reapply for approval if you wish to avoid an interruption of your data collection.

Protocol Number: 13028-EX

316 E. Cullen Building Houston, TX 77204-2015 (713) 743-9204 Fax: (713) 743-9577

COMMITTEES FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

Appendix B
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM



HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

HATTIE MAE WHITE EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT CENTER
4400 WEST 18th STREET • HOUSTON, TEXAS 77092-8501

TERRY B. GRIER, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools

www.houstonisd.org
[www.twitter.com/HoustonISD](https://twitter.com/HoustonISD)

Carla J. Stevens
*Assistant Superintendent
Research and Accountability Department*
Tel: 713-556-6700 • Fax: 713-556-6730

October 30, 2012

April Williams
2742 Laguna Pointe
Pearland, TX 77584

Dear Ms. Williams,

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is pleased to approve the research study titled, "A study of the effectiveness of an online credit recovery initiative in preventing high school dropouts." The purpose of this project is to investigate the effectiveness of the implementation of the graduation labs versus traditional credit recovery methods in terms of graduation rates. The projected date of completion is May 2013.

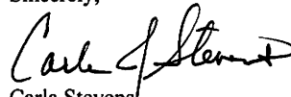
Approval to conduct the data request in HISD is contingent on your meeting the following conditions:

- The researcher will be provided an Excel file of HISD high school students from 2009–2010 through 2011–2012. The data will include basic demographics such as gender, ethnicity, grade, at-risk status, and free/reduced lunch status. The grade column will be used to identify any repeater 9th grade students between the school years of 2009–2010 through 2011–2012.
- The high school data file would include course data in regards to students who attempted and completed traditional credit recovery methods and APEX online credit recovery through graduation labs. Graduation and/or completion data would also be provided in the data file.
- Due to Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) laws, the HISD Department of Research and Accountability will not release any student personal identifiable data. Nevertheless, ID's provided will be masked in such a way that the researcher will be able to match students from year to year.
- A fee will be assessed as the staff of HISD Department of Research and Accountability assist in the data collection process. The study involves no expense to the district.
- This study does not interfere with the District's instructional/testing program.
- The researcher must follow the guidelines of HISD and the University of Houston regarding the protection of human subjects and confidentiality of data. The HISD signed letter of agreement must be submitted prior to initiating the study.
- While the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university is responsible for oversight of the study, the HISD Department of Research and Accountability will also monitor the study to ensure compliance to ethical conduct guidelines established by the Department of Health and Human Services, Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) as well as the disclosure of student records outlined in FERPA Act.

- Data will only be reported in statistical summaries that preclude the identification of the district or any school participating in the study.
- In order to eliminate potential risks to study participants, the reporting of proposed changes in research activities must be promptly submitted to the HISD Department of Research and Accountability for approval prior to implementing changes. Non compliance to this guideline could impact the approval of future research studies in HISD.
- The final report must be submitted to the HISD Department of Research and Accountability within 30 days of completion.

Any changes or modifications to the current proposal must be submitted to the Department of Research and Accountability for approval. Should you need additional information or have any questions concerning the process, please contact me at (713) 556-6700.

Sincerely,



Carla Stevens
Assistant Superintendent

Attachment
CS: kt

cc: Michele Pola
Julie Baker
Mark Smith

Arnold Viramontes
Orlando Riddick
Jeanine Wilson